

THE MILLENNIAL CRITIC

Stanley Kauffmann on Film

1999–2009

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Edited by
Bert Cardullo

RIT Press
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My deep gratitude goes out to the late Mr. Kauffmann and his wife, Laura, for their valuable support of and assistance on this project during the final years of their lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Stanley Kauffmann was born in New York City on April 24, 1916, and was graduated from the College of Fine Arts of New York University in 1935. He spent ten years, from 1931 to 1941, as an actor and stage manager with the Washington Square Players and published a large number of short as well as long plays. He was also the author of seven novels, published in the United States and abroad, and two collections of memoirs; for Bantam, Ballantine, and Knopf, he worked as a book publisher's editor from 1949 to 1960. From 1967 to 1986, Kauffmann taught drama and film at Yale University; between the years 1973 and 2006, he also taught at The City University of New York, Hunter College, and Adelphi University.

Starting in 1958, Kauffmann became active in criticism. At that time he was appointed the film critic of *The New Republic*, with which magazine he was associated ever since, except for an eight-month period in 1966 when he was exclusively the theater critic of *The New York Times*. In addition to his film reviews, he wrote a large number of book reviews for *The New Republic*; from 1969 to 1979 he served as both film and theater critic for this magazine; and earlier, from 1963 to 1965, Kauffmann also served as the drama critic for the Public Broadcasting television station in New York, WNET. He continued as film critic for *The New Republic* but wrote theater criticism for the *Saturday Review* for five years, from 1979 to 1985. He contributed reviews and articles to many other journals, as well—among them *Horizon*, *Commentary*, *Salmagundi*, *Yale Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Theater*, and *The American Scholar*.

Kauffmann published eight collections of film criticism in his lifetime: *A World on Film* (1966), *Figures of Light* (1971), *Living Images* (1975), *Before My Eyes* (1980), *Field of View* (1986), *Distinguishing Features* (1994), *Regarding Film* (2001), and *Ten Great Films* (2012). He was the editor of the anthology *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane* (1972). He also published three collections of theater criticism, *Persons of the Drama* (1976), *Theater Criticisms* (1983), and *About the Theater* (2010), together with two collections of interviews: *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (2003) and *Film Critic Talks: Interviews with Stanley Kauffmann, 1972–2012* (2013).

In 1974 Kauffmann was given the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism; from 1972 to 1976 he was a member of the Theater-and-Film Advisory Panel of the National Endowment for the Arts; in 1969 and 1975 he was a juror for the National Book Awards; and in 1982 he received the George Polk Award for Film Criticism as well as the

Edwin Booth Award in 1986, in addition to the 1986 Birmingham Film Festival Prize for Lifetime Achievement and the 1999 Telluride Film Festival Award for Criticism. A former Ford Foundation (1964, 1971), Rockefeller (1978), Guggenheim (1979–80), Japan Foundation (1986), and New York Institute for the Humanities (1995) fellow, Kauffmann received an Emmy award for the first-ever television series about film, which he conducted for five years in the 1960s on WNET-TV, the New York PBS station. He also received, in 1995, the Outstanding Teacher Award from the Association for Theater in Higher Education.

Pre-deceased in 2012 by his wife since 1943, Laura Cohen Kauffmann, Stanley Kauffmann died in New York City on October 9, 2013, at the age of ninety-seven.

INTRODUCTION

Man of the Movies: The Film Criticism of Stanley Kauffmann

by Bert Cardullo

Wolcott Gibbs, late of *The New Yorker*, once wrote the following of his experience as a film critic:

It is my indignant opinion that ninety percent of the moving pictures exhibited in America are so vulgar, witless, and dull that it is preposterous to write about them in any publication not intended to be read while chewing gum.¹

Gibbs vowed that he would never review another movie, and he kept his promise.

As it happens, he quit movie reviewing just before the discovery that there was a market for European films in the United States. It was the 1946 box-office triumph in New York of Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* that opened the way for many low-budget Italian and French pictures. Even better ones began coming to America, from Asia as well as Europe, after the 1950 success of Kurosawa's *Rashomon*. These foreign films increasingly exposed the tinsel and cardboard of the indigenous product, but—more to the present point—they made the reviewing of movies a rewarding activity.

Stanley Kauffmann's career as a film critic for *The New Republic* began not long afterward, in February of 1958—decades before the advent of simplified thumbs-up, thumbs-down reviewing popularized by television commentators like Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. Significantly, this was also the year in which *Agee on Film* was published, and thus a year that marks the beginning of a change in general attitudes toward serious film criticism in the United States. Indeed, the 1960s and early 1970s were heady times for such criticism. Films, then, were being talked about in terms of art, and the central document of the time describing the general conversation was written in 1966 by Stanley Kauffmann and published in his very first collection of film criticism, *A World on Film* (also from 1966): it was titled "The Film Generation." "There exists a Film Generation," Kauffmann opined, "the first generation that has matured in a culture in which the film has been of accepted serious relevance, however that seriousness is defined."² Kauffmann's directly stated and cleanly structured essay was written in his characteristically precise, quietly professional style. Looking optimistically toward the future, "The Film Generation" supplied historical context and reasonable definition for the burgeoning American film culture.

In colleges and universities, in cafés, bars, theater lobbies, and their surrounding sidewalks, movies were then becoming the subject of heated debates. Neither moviegoing nor movie reviewing was new, as Kauffmann's own *American Film Criticism: From the Beginnings to Citizen Kane* (1972) proved. But youthful hordes, uncomfortable with literature and not yet enslaved by television, now found something to get excited about in the cinema. More than ever before and perhaps ever since, they looked to critics to stimulate, shape, or confirm their opinions, and they gravitated toward the critics who best satisfied their individual bents.

The word "critics" refers to journalistic ones (as opposed to newspaper reviewers), not academics or scholars. It was the former group that led the fight to give film stature as art, and by the first few years of the 1970s this battle had been won. Virtually every college and university in America by then was offering film courses, and many had degree programs or were in the process of developing them. Yet with every new course, program, and treatise, ironically, the writing of the pioneering journalistic critics became less relevant to the professors. Was this a case of film education outdistancing the journalists, whose establishment had advanced to middle age or beyond, and who had therefore ceased to grow intellectually? Or had the demand to achieve academic respectability killed off the love of movies in those film scholars, who, once drawn to motion pictures out of passion, were now burying them in mounds of hopelessly "scientific," theoretical verbiage?

The split between the academics or scholars and the journalistic critics can best be understood in terms of classical and romantic temperaments: one deductive, starting with general principles and moving to specific examples, the other inductive, relying on each "text" to stimulate insights appropriate to it. And because of the strong French influence on academic thinking about film, it was unlikely then, in the mid-1970s, just as it is now, that American journalistic critics would adopt any of the academy's viewpoints. For those viewpoints go against a longstanding American tradition. Leslie Fiedler put this issue best when he said something to the effect that no matter what they try to do, the French keep reinventing neoclassicism while the Americans keep reinventing romanticism.

Stanley Kauffmann himself once said something similar in a 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*:

The academic critics think of me as an impressionist, because I . . . deal experientially with film, deal with it analytically in terms of a highly personal set of ineffable standards. That is, I could not possibly codify for you what my beliefs are about film; it's a matter of instances rather than precepts.³

For Kauffmann, the most fundamental quality of film criticism was not the code or theory behind it, but its moral rigor—its commitment to the art of film, passion to see it improve and be taken as seriously as any fine art, and disregard for any kind of popularity. It seems, then, that for the foreseeable future (and that future may be brief given the surfeit of Internet "chat" about the cinema) journalistic criticism of this kind will be

at odds with academic film study. But the journalists still need to be read, especially in universities, if only to keep alive the romantic enthusiasm that brought professors to the cinema in the first place.

Where does Stanley Kauffmann stand among the journalistic critics? Though precise terminology is elusive, there were, at the time he became prominent, two kinds of critics: the “eggheads,” who preferred what were loosely called art films, and the populists, who “grooved” on Hollywood movies and their foreign counterparts where they could find them. The eggheads were Stanley Kauffmann, Dwight Macdonald, Vernon Young, and John Simon, with relatively few adherents. The populists were Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Manny Farber, with their legions of followers. In between, and antecedent to both groups, were good souls like James Agee, Robert Warshow, and Otis Ferguson (all three of whom died prematurely, perhaps to the enhancement of their already deserved reputations).

Of the egghead critics, Kauffmann was the least dogmatic and the least elitist, though he was accused by his detractors of being too “distant,” “professorial,” or “dispassionate”—too impersonal in his reviews, according to the crusading Kael, to make others want to see the movies he liked. (Would an “impersonal” critic have forgiven many sins in otherwise negligible films, as Kauffmann often did, as long as they had a progressive social message?) Nonetheless, for over fifty years, Stanley Kauffmann wrote about film in *The New Republic* and elsewhere. And since 1967, he had also been teaching film as well as theater and critical writing at the Yale School of Drama, Hunter College, The City University of New York Graduate Center, and beyond. Kauffmann’s own critical style is civilized and easygoing, not chattily egocentric like Kael’s, coltishly soul-baring like Sarris’s, or Olympianly ironic like Macdonald’s. He was a man at home in film history, conversant with culture and the arts generally, informative without being preachy, using his writing to think about his subject and pleased to take us into his confidence.

The internal consistency of Kauffmann’s evaluations makes clear that he said what he thought, though his insights were neither gratuitously shocking nor necessarily innovative, and he did not make a show of himself or battle insistently on behalf of his own reputation. Here, then, was a critic who took films more seriously than he took himself. His stance was anything but a commonplace one among his fellow critics. Indeed, much film criticism still seems to be written by persons who love nothing more than their own persona, or know no other art form. As Kauffmann himself put the matter in a 1965 essay on Pauline Kael in *Harper’s Magazine*, he pledged allegiance to

a view of the film as a descendant of the theater and literature, certainly *sui generis* but not without ancestors or cousins, to be judged by its own unique standards which are yet analogous to those of other arts: a view that is pluralistic, aesthetic but not anti-science, contemporary but not unhistorical, and humanistic.⁴

Stanley Kauffmann, then, was a man of large interests, great knowledge, and supreme responsibility.

A particular value of his work was his willingness to go against critical consensus. Kauffmann was never intimidated, for example, by precious, arty analyses and endorsements of films that included the French cachet (from *Cahiers du cinéma*) among their number. Nor was he ever overawed by films that won their fame because of their “difficulty,” or because they claimed to be “advanced.” Just because a film was labeled *nouvelle vague*, or New Wave, and was made by Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Philippe de Broca, Agnès Varda, even Jean Cocteau or Robert Bresson, Kauffmann did not cast aside his obligations as a critic to take on the mantle of a cineaste. No matter how big or idolized the director he reviewed, Kauffmann always strove to separate brouhaha from artistry.

Witness his disliking of *The Serpent’s Egg* (1978) despite the fact that he was an Ingmar Bergman fan; his not hesitating to explain why *Perceval* (1978) fails even though he was otherwise an admirer of Eric Rohmer; or, in a *Salmagundi* interview from 1991 (included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*), his extended critique of the urbane realism of an otherwise overrated Woody Allen. Witness also the following come-uppances Kauffmann delivered to Luis Buñuel in *A World on Film* in a review of *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz* (1955):

He is a master technician with the outlook of a collegiate idealist who has just discovered venality and lust. . . . Buñuel, the swami of sadism, has now reached the point of self-parody. . . . Buñuel remains, for me, a highly resourceful technician and a highly neurotic adolescent.⁵

Buñuel may have been too old and too far gone to change by this time (1966), but these harsh words surely gave some “Buñuel-can-do-no-wrong” devotees a prod toward reevaluating their master.

All the pieces on Buñuel in *A World on Film* are grouped together, which is not as trivial an editorial choice as it may sound. Rather, it is symptomatic of Kauffmann’s long-time concern with continuity—one that continued up through his last book, *Ten Great Films* (2012). When, in *Before My Eyes* (1980), you read his review of *Family Plot* (1976), you also register the important point that, for all the encomia about Alfred Hitchcock’s style, a Hitchcock film has always stood or stumbled by virtue of its script. An extended essay in the same volume on *8½* (1963) discusses not just that film but also its relation to Federico Fellini’s life and its place in the cinematic pantheon as well as the artistic pantheon generally. Writing on the much-awarded *Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978), Kauffmann once again swims against the critical tide by asserting that it is far from top-drawer Ermanno Olmi, and proceeds to explain why by citing much earlier, better films by this director like *Il Posto* (1961) and *The Fiancés* (1963).

No qualifications of such value judgments on Stanley Kauffmann’s part are necessary because, in unabashedly, rigorously, thoughtfully, and humanely deploying those principles of value and judgment, he always reached conclusions that were conditional.

Responding, for instance, to Susan Sontag's contention, in her famous essay on Godard (from the 1969 book *Styles of Radical Will*) that just as no absolute, immanent standards can be discovered for determining the composition, duration, and placement of a shot, there can be no truly sound reason for excluding anything from a film,⁶

Kauffmann wrote the following in *Figures of Light* (1971):

This seemingly staggering statement is only the extreme extension of a thesis that any enlightened person would support: there are no absolutes in art. The Godardians take this to mean (like Ivan Karamazov) that therefore everything is permissible. Others of us take it to mean that therefore standards have to be empirically searched out and continually readjusted, to distinguish art from autism; that, just as responsive morals have to be found without a divine authority if humanity is to survive, so responsive aesthetics have to be found without canonical standards if art is to survive.⁷

Some, in reading Kauffmann's conflation of aesthetic and moral standards above, may choose to see the finger-wagging or millennial doomsaying of a self-appointed cultural gatekeeper. Yet such a conflation is not just an essential tenet for anyone engaged in criticism: it is in addition a sign of the genuine ardor, and the true seriousness (shorn of any sweater-vest insinuations), that Stanley Kauffmann brought to bear in his own writing.

As should anyone who is deeply serious about art, Kauffmann took failings in it as they should be taken: that is, personally. "Fine artists make us feel proprietary about them," he wrote in *Before My Eyes*, apropos of Antonioni's 1975 film *The Passenger*:

They invade us so strongly, become so much a part of the way we look outward and inward, that we can't approach new works of theirs without a sense that we are intimately involved.⁸

Kauffmann's aesthetic high-mindedness was of the healthiest variety imaginable, born neither of easy cynicism nor of unthinking adherence to traditional (i.e., fabricated) canonical standards—whose existence, in any salutarily tangible sense, he dismissed as casually as the Almighty's. Such high-minded thinking was premised on a profound disdain of glibness, of posturing, of pretense and laziness and arbitrariness, qualities that are disagreeable enough in other spheres of existence but positively despicable in (what should be) the heightened and heightening realm of art. (The divination of artistic purpose, purpose both worthy and realized, was another of Kauffmann's perennially unfashionable dedications.)

Already during his first full decade as a film critic, Kauffmann had become one of the profession's most admired writers for the directness of his spare prose. He wasted little time in getting to the point. For this reason, *A World on Film* remains one of the best of collections of his movie reviews, even if it was the first. Writing about an Irvin Kershner picture, for example, Kauffmann opened with the following sentence: "*The Luck of Ginger Coffey* [1964]... is the sort of work that is vastly overpraised simply

because it is not phony.”⁹ The first sentence of Kauffmann’s review of *L’Avventura* (1960) is itself short, simple, and resoundingly dramatic: “At last.”¹⁰ Furthermore, compare the heart- and loin-throbbing double-entendre titles of Pauline Kael’s collections of film criticism (*I Lost It at the Movies*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *Going Steady*, *Deeper into Movies*, *When the Lights Go Down*, *Taking It All In*) with the sober, scrutinizing, ocular-based metaphors of Kauffmann’s (*Figures of Light*, *Living Images*, *Before My Eyes*, *Field of View*, *Distinguishing Features*, and finally, simply, *Regarding Film*).

Apart from the economy of his writing style, breadth of range is another Kauffmann virtue, abundantly on display in *Before My Eyes*. What other critic would begin a review of Robert Altman’s *A Wedding* (1978), as Kauffmann does in this book, by relating the film to latter-day European naturalism; in another piece, compare Bergman to Eugene O’Neill; or, in another review, detail the ways in which young German filmmakers of the 1970s utilized American popular culture? Who other than Kauffmann would lay out Lina Wertmüller’s options for portraying the Holocaust in *Seven Beauties* (1976)... and then explain why she decided on comedy; or indicate his perceptiveness of the pleasures, and occasional profundities, of pop by calling *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) not simply the best science-fiction movie ever made but “an event in the history of faith”?¹¹ Who else among the critics would notice—as Kauffmann does in *Regarding Film*—in Warren Beatty’s *Bulworth* (1998) an unacknowledged debt not only to Frank Capra’s *Meet John Doe* (1941) but also to a Finnish film and a Ukrainian one; reveal his astute appreciation of the old Hollywood masters by arguing that to place John Ford among the great directors of the world, as we must, is to see that the ‘pure force of genius’ is relatively stronger in Ford than in Dickens because Ford had much less freedom of choice and much less control over the finished form of his work;¹² or discuss, during a single conversation (with Studs Terkel in 1985, included in *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann*) about the theater, the subjects of Harold Pinter and acting, Samuel Beckett and Bert Lahr, and Bertolt Brecht and Berlin?

From the perspective of his more than five decades as a critic, nearly four decades as a teacher, and a number of years in between as an editor, playwright, and novelist, Stanley Kauffmann clearly continued to see films in a broad cultural and historical context that eludes the tunnel-vision reviewers whose only reference points are Hollywood, old movies, and the box office. He was particularly sensitive to the parasitic relationship that middlebrow movies too often have with genuine art. “He’s the film equivalent of the advertising-agency art director who haunts the galleries to keep his eye fresh,” Kauffmann wrote of Robert Altman in *Before My Eyes*, adding,

The future may judge our age culturally by its high estimate of Altman. Indeed, the nonsense about him is already coming undone.¹³

Reviewing Kauffmann’s *Living Images* (1975) a number of years ago, one reviewer suggested that his most salient quality as a critic was that of “raffish dignity.”¹⁴ His raffishness was more wry than pronounced, however, as in the following humorous

comment about George Stevens' *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), from *A World on Film*:

Sometimes I am more relieved than at other times that I am not a Christian; these occasions include the experience of most films about Jesus.¹⁵

Kauffmann's raffishness remained as lively as ever, as in the following understatedly but effectively witty comment about *Fargo* (1996), from *Regarding Film* (2001): "The hot news about Joel and Ethan Coen is that they have made a tolerable film."¹⁶ Or, from the same collection, these slicing words about *Touch of Evil*: "[Charlton] Heston's attempts to be a dashing young man were painful even when he was young."¹⁷ Often Kauffmann's opening lines are as amusingly provocative as Pauline Kael's. Witness the following three from *Before My Eyes*:

When François Truffaut has an idea, he makes a film. And sometimes when he doesn't have an idea, he makes a film anyway.¹⁸

Paddy Chayefsky is the kind of writer who is not an obvious escape-monger or fabricator but a venturer who takes his audience on an interesting tour of anguish and then delivers everyone safely right back to his front door.¹⁹

One way to pass the time while watching a turkey with big people in it is to wonder why they agreed to do it.²⁰

Sometimes, however, Kauffmann's amusing provocativeness or dignified raffishness turns to harsh dismissal. This may be the result of an impatience with stars or directors who keep flourishing despite his low opinion of them, but, from the mid-1970s on, Kauffmann seemed less willing to be gentlemanly. Thus, in *Before My Eyes*, he saw his bugbear Robert Altman as "a walking death sentence on the prospects of American film" and a "public embarrassment"; the director's *Quintet* (1979) was deemed "paralyzingly stupid."²¹ *Shampoo* (1975) struck Kauffmann in the same volume as "disgusting,"²² while Liza Minnelli in *New York, New York* (1977) resembled a "giant rodent en route to a costume ball."²³ Perhaps for a critic so concerned with film's relationship to larger culture, the many opportunities lost, bungled, or cheapened had come to seem unbearable after years of reviewing.

Even so, as early as 1959, Kauffmann was able to toss off this line in dismissal of Gregory Peck: "He embodies Gordon Craig's ideal of an actor: an Übermarionette, wooden to the core."²⁴ Only two years later—in the same collection of criticism—he had this to say about the performance of Jackie Gleason in *The Hustler*: "It is the best use of a manikin by a director since Elia Kazan photographed Burl Ives as Big Daddy"²⁵ in 1958's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. And, in 1963, in an interview published by the magazine *Seventh Art*, Kauffmann dismissed *la politique des auteurs*, or the *auteur* theory of film (which holds that the director is the primary "author" of any motion picture), with the following words:

I think it is utterly boring... it's for irresponsible children. It bores me even to say as much as I've said.²⁶

Whether harsh or generous, Stanley Kauffmann was most certainly a master of the felicitous phrase and memorable characterization. So, in *Regarding Film*, he describes Emma Thompson as the “first film actress since Katharine Hepburn to make intelligence sexy”²⁷; he finds in *Amistad* (1997) a sense of “presence in the past”²⁸ he has not experienced since Bergman’s *Virgin Spring* (1960); and he notes that Oliver Stone “in appalling measure”²⁹ succeeds in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Kauffmann is acute about a lesser but related film, *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which “nourishes, abets, cultural slumming [with] calculated grunginess.”³⁰ And, ever sensitive to cinematography, he writes of *Stalingrad* (1993) that “the colors don’t glamorize, they confirm,”³¹ while in the camerawork of *Sister My Sister* (1994) he finds “the everyday put before us as evidence of strangeness.”³² In *Carrington* (1995), for its part,

appurtenances of class and of conscious bohemianism are integral to the characters themselves, not imposed as décor. Settings and story are unified.³³

As they were not, for instance, in *Barry Lyndon* (1975). At a time—the last quarter of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—when gorgeous cinematography had all but overwhelmed intelligent screenwriting, Kauffmann’s senses never overpowered his sensibility. Of *Barry Lyndon*, whose visual splendor blinded many critics to its intellectual emptiness, he wrote in *Before My Eyes*:

Stanley Kubrick began professional life as a photographer and has lately been reverting to his first career. His new film very nearly accommodates Zeno’s paradox of motion: it seems to remain in one place while actually it is moving ahead. Kubrick has produced three hours and four minutes of pictures.³⁴

Unlike *auteurists* and other aesthetes, then, Kauffmann understood that films begin where most reviews don’t: with the screenplay. And he reiterated his belief when he wrote the following in praise of *Charley Varrick* (1973) in *Living Images*:

It was directed by Don Siegel, a great favorite of the *auteur* critics, and it proves yet again that there’s nothing wrong with an *auteur* director that a good script [by Howard Rodman and Dean Riesner, as adapted from John Reese’s novel *The Looters*] can’t cure.³⁵

None of the above is to say that Stanley Kauffmann was the kind of film critic who could easily be dismissed as “literary.” For example, Kauffmann’s ability to engage with non-narrative work that, in his eyes, thoroughly justifies its breaking of conventional cinematic modes through the validity of its artistic purpose, as well as the breadth of its intellectual and technical resources, is evidenced by his piece on Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s *Our Hitler* (1977), included in *Field of View* (1986). Moreover, Kauffmann reserves

his greatest scorn for conventional screenwriters whose own prose never equals their literary aspirations, deftly puncturing the pretensions of, among others, James Toback (*The Gambler*, 1974) and Thomas McGuane (*The Missouri Breaks*, 1976). Kauffmann is also mercilessly attentive to the sort of detail that is usually overlooked in hyperbolic reviews. Reviewing *The Godfather, Part II* in 1975, for example, he patiently notes four gigantic plot holes before adding casually,

And, by the way, the ship on which young Vito is said to be arriving in New York from Sicily is actually leaving New York, sailing south past the Statue of Liberty.³⁶

One of the subconscious advantages of being a critic on a “little” magazine like *The New Republic* may be that one feels sufficiently free to tout small films, or neglected art, in addition to covering major releases such as the first part of *The Godfather* (1972). Kauffmann always showed this predilection for unheralded work, perhaps never more strongly than in *Before My Eyes*. There Elaine May’s barely acknowledged *Mikey and Nicky* (1976) is praised as “an implicitly large film” and “an odd, biting, grinning, side-ways-scuttling rodent of a picture”³⁷ that is the best film by an American woman to date. *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), to Kauffmann’s eyes, is the finest film about Vietnam, far above *Coming Home* (released in the same year)—a point that he expands upon during his 1992 interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*³⁸ with reference to *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). The flaws in *Go Tell the Spartans* are pointed out, to be sure, but so are the wider accomplishments. And so is the acting.

Among the major distinctions that set Kauffmann apart from other film critics was a preoccupation with actors. Having been a stage actor himself, he was sensitive to performers while other film critics treated them tangentially, if at all—even if they were icons on the order of Cary Grant or Marilyn Monroe, who had the screen power to shape the force and nature of their films. Kauffmann was the antithesis of those critics who believed that “serious” film criticism had everything to do with theory, genre, politics, *auteurism*, or other theme-couching considerations, and very little to do with the acting leads whom they parenthetically deigned to cite. To word-shoveling spiritual rhapsodists like Pauline Kael and Parker Tyler, then, Burt Lancaster up there on the screen might as well have been Arnold Stang. Even someone normally as judicious as Vernon Young could mindlessly argue that “film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film’s total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good.”³⁹

As evidence of Stanley Kauffmann’s keen interest in screen acting, let’s have a look at this critic on the acting of Jane Fonda—someone whose career he had watched from the beginning. He keenly locates the mediocrity of *Coming Home* as the source of Fonda’s “crimped” performance:

Her performance seems crimped by the role’s careful sterilization. There’s nothing much more than Jane Wyman pertness at the start, to which is later added some Elissa Landi soul. I choose ’30s references because, under the ’68 trappings, a perennial movie-movie is what *Coming Home* is.⁴⁰

Such a comment is typical of Kauffmann's criticism and serves as evidence, together with the following nuggets, that he was the only American film critic who had a thorough, incisive appreciation of the performance side of cinema.

From *A World on Film*, sample these remarks comparing Frank Sinatra with Marlon Brando:

The emotion displayed by Sinatra, one feels, is always Sinatra's emotion, not the character's If it were possible to see Sinatra in Brando's role in *On the Waterfront* [1954], that would clarify the difference between mere simulation and creative acting.⁴¹

In praise of Brenda de Banzie's performance in *The Entertainer* (1960), Kauffmann acerbically wrote, in the same volume,

Her drunk scene is one to which all Studio actors should be taken and held fast by the nape of the neck until they have seen it a dozen times.⁴²

And about Ralph Richardson's performance as the faded matinee idol James Tyrone in Sidney Lumet's film of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962), Kauffmann was not afraid to be stingy, even to a time-honored great, when he wrote in *A World on Film* that the actor

provides a sound performance, instead of the affected distortion that he often palms off as originality. One cannot quite believe that his face ever set feminine hearts aflutter or that he is more than occasionally Irish (when he remembers the brogue); but he drives hard and honestly for the center of this warped, grandiloquent man.⁴³

Nor was Kauffmann afraid to praise a performance that other reviewers had damned. In his critique of John Frankenheimer's film version of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1973), from *Living Images*, he lauded the acting of Lee Marvin, whose portrayal of Hickey, many other critics felt, had let the production down—especially in comparison to Jason Robards's legendary stage rendition of this major character. "And to crown the work there is Lee Marvin, as Hickey, the salesman-apostle," Kauffmann wrote, continuing:

To put it simply: Marvin was born to play Hickey. He has the perfect understanding of the man and perfect equipment to deal with it. . . . Marvin understands the bumps and sags, and he lifts it all adroitly with gesture, with vaudevillian's esprit, to present both the man who was and who is. Then comes the payoff, the great last act. Marvin is wonderful. I have seen James Barton, the first Hickey, and Jason Robards (along with others), and though they were both unforgettably good, Marvin goes past them—so powerfully that he makes the crux of the play clearer than I have ever found it before, on stage or page.⁴⁴

Let us now consider Stanley Kauffmann on the creative acting of Paul Newman—a performer who appeared alongside Lee Marvin in *Pocket Money* (1972), and whose work Kauffmann had early celebrated, in *A World on Film*, in a dual review of Robert Rossen's *The Hustler* (1961) and Martin Ritt's *Paris Blues* (1961). The following passage comes from an interview with Kauffmann that appeared in *Film Heritage* in the fall of 1972:

Paul Newman is much more subtle than he's given credit for being . . . If I could take clips from *Sometimes a Great Notion* [1971] and *Pocket Money* and show them to you side by side, figuratively, I think I could demonstrate what I mean about subtlety of imagination working its way out through vocal inflection, physical attitudes, personality aura, and all the other factors that go towards subtle delineation. Newman . . . *thinks* differently in his pictures. It's not a question of a stock company actor putting on hook nose and beard and becoming "somebody else," a man of a thousand faces or anything like that—that's easy. Newman works from a core outward, differently. And you would find, I believe, that his whole system of timing was different in *Pocket Money* from what it was in the logging picture, *Sometimes a Great Notion*.⁴⁵

Lastly in the acting department, consider this analysis, from *Regarding Film*, of the two stars who have played Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* (1962, 1997):

James Mason is the ideal Humbert. He gives us a doomed man, conscious of it, accepting it . . . [Jeremy] Irons in the role [gives] it his customary vestments of intelligence and sensitive reticence, but at his deepest he is no more than melancholy. Mason suggested a tragic fall."⁴⁶

As for the difference between a comic performer and a comic actor, Kauffmann asserts in *A World on Film*:

A performer is a person who does things to make you laugh; an actor creates a character at whose actions and utterances you laugh."⁴⁷

To Kauffmann, Peter Ustinov and Peter Sellers were comic performers; Alec Guinness and Jack Lemmon were comic actors. Of the "comic" Lemmon, Kauffmann went on presciently to say the following—also from *A World on Film*—about his performance in Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960):

Jack Lemmon is the kind of problem American films need. He is a vigorous, highly talented, and technically equipped actor with a wide emotional range. Can Hollywood supply him with material that is good enough for him?⁴⁸

Probably most important in any consideration of Stanley Kauffmann's critical virtues is that, while many of his fellow reviewers were carried away on their own waves of rhetorical bluster, or blurby hyperbole, during the last few decades of the twentieth century and well into the twenty-first—particularly in their indiscriminating remarks about film acting—he did not forget the real duty or responsibility of a critic. Which

is to exercise his judgment in the service of art, not to try desperately to substitute rhetorical fireworks for the experience of art, or to attempt to create masterpieces by fiat rather than discover them by careful observation. To be sure, Kauffmann was not afraid to generalize from his detailed observations, though he was always careful to avoid the thesis-mongering that too often passes these days for cultural criticism.

For his part, he avoided such axe-grinding. Letting his aesthetics flow into his morality, without dichotomy, Kauffmann thus explored movies in order to search out the universality of their subject matter, the artistry of their technique, and the ethical force that makes some art objects greater than others. He wonderfully does all three in a review of that difficult yet impressive film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), where, neither blinded by its technique nor alienated by its innovation, he could lucidly and sympathetically locate its artistic impulse at the same time as he had to conclude,

After *Marienbad*, I knew more about Alain Resnais and Resnais's search for reality; but after *La Notte* [1961] and *L'Avventura* I knew more about myself.⁴⁹

Kauffmann's description of Harry Alan Potamkin, in a thoughtful appreciation of the late Marxist critic, could equally apply to himself: "He judged film by its own criteria, certainly . . . but criteria no more lax or unbuttoned than those that any good critic would apply to any other art." Unfortunately, as Kauffmann noted in this piece from *Before My Eyes*,

The assumption, then and now, is that such an approach precludes appreciation of good popular film. Or that such an approach marks the 'literary' film critic.⁵⁰

Perhaps this was too sour a view of the cinematic landscape in the late 1970s. But it is none too sour a view from the vantage point of 2015. If anyone is beleaguered these days, it is critics with taste and intelligence—like the late Stanley Kauffmann—who bring to their work a *littérateur's* perspective on narrative structure and character development, who use their cultural appetite to make thematic connections between movies (the most populist art form) and literature, and who, pedagogically speaking, focus less on the sociological or political implications of a film than on the quality of its artistic expression.

Still, Kauffmann felt considerably less beleaguered than most of his fellow film critics; and, as he pointed out in his interview in *South Atlantic Quarterly*,

The serious critic . . . who can't enjoy what to him is an entertainment film, is lacking in full capacity for enjoying the best film, I think.⁵¹

As Kauffmann himself would have agreed, the fact that a Japanese film by Yasujiro Ozu does not run very long in America's biggest city doesn't prove any more about the status of the art and its audience than the fact that Athol Fugard's drama *Boesman and Lena* (1969) didn't break the attendance record set by *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), or that John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (1964) did not outsell the pop poetry of Rod McKuen. It is not so much that Kauffmann was sanguine about the state of the cinema at any particular time;

rather, he knew that masterpieces in any form in any age are few and far between, and that a responsible critic must exercise the same judgment in the valleys as on the peaks. In the meantime, he was hardly waiting around for the next great work of art to appear, or for an old master miraculously to regain his powers.

Indeed, Kauffmann's powers of discernment are perhaps most evident in his writing about films that were far from being total successes; he is capable of simultaneously appreciating their virtues (often limited) and deploring their shortcomings (often considerable). "*Julia* is irresistible," he confessed in 1977.

Tears must flow. Mine certainly did. But this is not to say that it's really good. In fact, if it were *really* good, tears might flow less, perhaps not at all. *Julia* is first-class middlebrow beautified filmmaking.⁵²

Or consider, from 1978, this vintage-Kauffmann criticism of Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven*:

He brought over Nestor Almendros for this film and has proved, by doing this, the last thing he wanted to prove: there is no such thing as an artist-cinematographer; there are only good cinematographers who sometimes work for artists. And when the director is weak, as Malick is here, he tends to lean more and more on the good cinematographer's ability, and so swamps the film in pretty pictures.⁵³

In the end, Stanley Kauffmann's film writing creates the kind of evocative and sensitive critical world that recharges a work of art while searching out and probing its parts. He does not merely mediate between his readers and the artwork; he allows the play of his intelligence to respond to the force of that work, using language to capture the thrust of a film and test it against its own possibilities. At his best, Kauffmann responds to the cinema, in Henry James's phrase, with "perception at the pitch of passion."⁵⁴ Agreement with him matters less than recognition of his ability to summon up the memory of films enjoyed; to evoke the pleasure of, and build up appetite for, films unseen; and, on privileged occasions, to change our long-held but nonetheless obsolete critical estimates, or to make us reflect for the first time on the magic of being born at a time when the arrival of film could transform one's life. Without the movies, writes Kauffmann in *Regarding Film*,

Josef von Sternberg might have spent his life in the lace business; Howard Hawks might have remained an engineer . . . [David] Lean might have browned out his life as a London accountant.⁵⁵

So too did Stanley Kauffmann discover film criticism, and apply himself to it, at precisely the right time.

The right time, the late 1950s and early 1960s, was also when Kauffmann became one of the first film critics to use television as a means of consistently investigating film culture, as he brought an erudite brand of criticism to the public airwaves. Stanley

Kauffmann was the host of “The Art of Film” on the old WNDT-TV, based in Newark, New Jersey, from 1963 to 1967. (WNDT merged with National Educational Television [NET] in 1970, when the Public Broadcasting Service was formed, and became PBS’s New York affiliate, WNET-TV, Channel 13.) On this program—which in 1964 won a local New York-area Emmy Award for general excellence—he conducted serious discussions regarding the techniques and artistry of filmmaking with guests who included directors and screenwriters such as Michelangelo Antonioni and Harold Pinter, as well as producers and actors. Film clips were interspersed to illustrate points in a documentary-like manner, rather than being used as they mostly were in later years: as free advertising by studios trying to plug their newest releases. As much as his reviews in *The New Republic* and the books that anthologized them, “The Art of Film” thus helped to establish Kauffmann’s reputation as a critic of perception and power.

As if his television commentary and print reviewing of film were not enough, Stanley Kauffmann was even a frontline drama critic for a time, starting in the 1960s, for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review* among other publications. (Indeed, from 1963 to 1965, he served as both the drama and the film critic for the public television station in Newark, WNDT.) He stopped writing regular theater criticism in 1985 but continued to write film criticism until his death in 2013. And the present volume, *The Millennial Critic*, contains a selection of that film criticism—arranged chronologically, by section, from the earliest piece to the latest—written during the last decade or so of his life. These pieces from the final years of Kauffmann’s career were selected on the basis of their international as well as national (American) representativeness, and with the idea in mind of creating a balance between prominent film directors and those directors early in their careers.

Included in *The Millennial Critic*, then, are reviews of such new and notable fiction releases as Terence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*, Theo Angelopoulos’s *Eternity and a Day*, Sam Mendes’s *American Beauty*, Pedro Almodóvar’s *All About My Mother*, Abbas Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Tsai Ming-liang’s *What Time Is It There?*, Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist*, Michel Gondry’s *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Ingmar Bergman’s *Saraband*, Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, Clint Eastwood’s *Flags of Our Fathers*, and Cristian Mungiu’s *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*; reconsiderations, or reviewings, of such classic films as Erich von Stroheim’s *Greed*, Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion*, and Luchino Visconti’s *The Leopard*; reviews, or evaluative records, of important documentaries such as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Agnès Varda’s *The Beaches of Agnès*; book “reports” on important new works such as *American Film Audiences* and *Cinema and Modernism*, as well as ruminations on such important subjects as the “death of film” and the state of contemporary film art; and remembrances, or retrospectives, of the careers of such notable artists as Marcello Mastroianni, John Gielgud, and Stanley Kubrick.

In *The Millennial Critic*, as in his previous collections, Kauffmann regularly comments on the nature, as well as what can be called (with the advent of the Internet) the crisis, of film criticism, as he does on such subjects as the function of criticism, the

qualifications of a critic, the influence or power of critics, newspaper reviewing versus magazine criticism versus academic scholarship, and critical theory as opposed to critical practice. Other topics routinely touched on in Kauffmann's work include the relationship between theater and film, particularly the difference between stage and screen acting; children and the cinema and the phenomenon of child actors; the relationship between novels and the movies made from them; Shakespeare and the cinema; sex and sexuality as well as realism, taste, and violence in film; the pleasures, and treasures, of documentary film; various national cinemas (among them those of Iceland, Georgia, and Chad); the extent to which cinema seems embedded in French culture more than in any other; the phenomenon of film festivals; the persistence of American independent filmmakers in the face of the commercial behemoth of Hollywood; the ostensible "death of film" in the age of digital cinema; and the issue of government subsidy for the cinema in particular and for the arts in general.

There is a long, lovely piece that Stanley Kauffmann wrote in tribute to (the still-living) John Gielgud in 1977 (and included in *Before My Eyes*), in which he took issue with Brecht's admonition in his play *Life of Galileo* (1938–47) that "Unhappy is the land that needs a hero."⁵⁶ "Unknown is the land that needs no hero. Unknown is the interior land that needs no hero," Kauffmann retorts:

Brecht's line becomes even more doubtful when we see that what we have chiefly left to cheer us, in the whirl and disorder of our days, are some heroes, heroines: not mouthers of ideals but practitioners of excellence, men and women who have made personal worlds in which the centers hold. They help us. And excellence that gives us a model, however distantly analogous to our lives, is a testament of possibility. Art is still one locus of such excellence, whichever art it is that speaks to you most directly.⁵⁷

Beyond the exquisite, carefully chosen phrasing whose ease belies its exceedingly precise construction, beyond the unerring sense of rhythm and cadence that punctuates a luxuriously unspooling flow of words, concepts, and imagery with short, sharp, functional little phrases ("They help us"), there is also in the above passage something fundamental to Kauffmann's writing as a whole—and something that went largely unremarked upon in the many respectful tributes to the longtime *New Republic* critic upon his death in October 2013 at the age of ninety-seven. That something, simply put, is drama: in the sweeping sense of scale that cannot be concealed behind the cool judiciousness of the prose, and in the utterly serious conviction that art, in its many and variegated forms, is playing for the highest stakes imaginable. Hence Kauffmann's critical writing is not only evaluation (though it is that, incisively), not only enthusiasm (though it is that, fervently); it is engagement, of a rare (not rarefied) variety: of a writer who has refined his craft, sharpened his perceptions, and through them broadened his range of response and feeling in celebrating an artist, Gielgud, whose work validates what he knows the medium to be capable of but that it so seldom achieves.

“Thus my account of debt, or a sketch of it,” Kauffmann ends his encomium to John Gielgud.

There is a rigor in his life (says his acting), there is—consciously or not—a vision of a theatre, of a film, better than has been available to him most of his career, thus a vision of the world better than the one he lives in. And thus, implicitly, he performs the fundamental function of art: to criticize life.⁵⁸

If the role of art is to criticize life, then Stanley Kauffmann ceaselessly demonstrated that criticism can be a way, for those to whom it speaks most directly, to live a life in art.

Notes

- 1 Wolcott Gibbs, *More in Sorrow* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), 268.
- 2 Stanley Kauffmann, *A World on Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 415.
- 3 Bert Cardullo, ed., *Conversations with Stanley Kauffmann* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), 168.
- 4 Stanley Kauffmann, “Focus on Film Criticism: *I Lost It at the Movies*, by Pauline Kael,” *Harper’s Magazine* 230 (June 1965): 114.
- 5 Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 352.
- 6 Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Dell, 1969), 176.
- 7 Stanley Kauffmann, *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 110–11.
- 8 Stanley Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes: Film Criticism and Comment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 121.
- 9 Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 128.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 11 Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 155.
- 12 Stanley Kauffmann, *Distinguishing Features: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 224.
- 13 Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 47.
- 14 Stephen R. Lawson, “Book Review of *Living Images*,” *Theater* 6, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 73.
- 15 Kauffmann, *A World on Film*, 28.
- 16 Stanley Kauffmann, *Regarding Film: Film Criticism and Comment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 83.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 18 Kauffmann, *Before My Eyes*, 189.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 101.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 207.

- 21 Ibid., 47.
22 Ibid., 116.
23 Ibid., 203.
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*Stanley Kauffmann,
Washington, D.C., 1998.
Photographer: Ian Allen.*



*Stanley Kauffmann with his wife, Laura, Saratoga Springs,
New York, 2002. Photographer: Emma Dodge Hanson.*



Stanley Kauffmann with his wife, Laura, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2002. Photographer: Emma Dodge Hanson.



Stanley Kauffmann, Saratoga Springs, New York, 2002. Photographer: Emma Dodge Hanson.

Shakespeare in Love

John Madden

4–11 January 1999

In *The Genius of Shakespeare* Jonathan Bate says that, contrary to the general impression, “We know a great deal more about Shakespeare’s life than we do about the lives of his fellow-dramatists and fellow-actors.” We know it from official documents, says Bate. “But . . . we do not learn very much from them about his character as it affects what we are interested in: his plays.” Luckily for the gaiety of nations, this point hasn’t hindered Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard, co-authors of *Shakespeare in Love*.

Stoppard said recently on television that Norman, an American who had written such items as *Cutthroat Island* and *Waterworld*, did the first draft of this screenplay; then he was called in. Who wrote this or that scene in the final version is of course indecipherable to us, but the result is clearly the work of people who know a good deal about the Elizabethan era and theater, so much so that they can play games with the material. This picture plays some diverting ones. With most historical films, the informed viewer scrutinizes in order to cluck at errors. (There are books full of such cluckings.) With *Shakespeare in Love*, the more one knows, the more one can enjoy the liberties taken.

John Madden, the director, aided by Martin Childs, the production designer, and Sandy Powell, who did the costumes, crams the London of 1593 with the hubbub and bustle and squalor and panoply that history justifies, and it’s all centered on a Bankside theater, the Rose, owned by the hard-pressed Philip Henslowe. This is factual: then comes the fantasy. Young Shakespeare, actor and playwright attached to the Rose, is trying to write a play for his company, and so far he has little but the title: *Romeo and Ethel, the Pirate’s Daughter*. No Elizabethan or Jacobean play’s title has that sort of formulation; thus, all that remains is to find out how we get to *Romeo and Juliet*.

To begin with, Shakespeare gets advice from his coeval and rival, Christopher Marlowe (a brief, incisive appearance by Rupert Everett). But the true inspiration for the plot of his play, even for scene structure, comes from the happenstance that Shakespeare falls in love—with the daughter of a wealthy family. The fact that he has a wife and children back in Stratford doesn’t hobble his passion, and the young lady, who hasn’t yet learned about his family, responds. Her name is Viola, another Shakespearean promise. (Her last name is de Lesseps. Is it some sort of private joke that the authors chose the family name of the man who, 300 years later, built the Suez Canal and attempted one in Panama?)

Materials for the play, as Shakespeare keeps trying to meet his deadline, come from

his experiences with Viola: her father's objection, her aristocratic fiancé, duels, a balcony scene complete with nurse, and more. I haven't seen such close correspondence between experience and art since a play about Wagner, in the 1930s, in which he is struggling to compose *Tristan and Isolde*, embraces a new mistress one evening, cries "I have it!" then rushes to his piano and whams out the "Liebestod." I was too young then to be anything but outraged; in Shakespeare, I thought it was an entertaining parody of the creative process, all the more entertaining because of its heat.

The screenplay also uses, with a swirling hand, a familiar Shakespearean device, the woman disguised as a man. Viola, mad for the poet, uninterested in the fiancé who has been arranged for her, transvests to become an actor in Shakespeare's theater (women of course being prohibited on the stage). This leads to a device that asks for our generosity. When we first see Viola, she has flowing blonde hair. When she appears in the theater, she has close-cropped brown hair, and we think that she has had herself shorn and dyed. But then we see her back home with the honey locks again. This back-and-forth hair-changing goes puzzlingly on. Oh, well, a fig for explanations. It's so incredible that, like Shakespeare's writing of his play (which is eventually called by its familiar name), we shrug because what's happening generally is so pleasant.

Other plot strands counterpoint the central story—Henslowe's woes with his creditors, the harrying of the theater by the Master of the Revels, the news of Marlowe's death and its effect, the presence of a twelve-year-old gamin named John Webster who hangs around the theater teasing people with live mice (a hint of the man who would write *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*). Queen Elizabeth herself is the *dea ex machina*, solving all problems at the end insofar as they can be solved. Her last line is a request to Master Shakespeare for a comedy, perhaps a play for *Twelfth Night*. He sets right to work; he already knows the name of the heroine.

John Madden's last film was *Mrs. Brown*, in which he deployed the relationship of Queen Victoria and John Brown with stateliness and wit. Here he has seemingly swilled some of Falstaff's sack and has had robustious, fiery fun. Judi Dench, who was his Victoria, is Elizabeth here, and no one else could be tolerated in the part. Madden's most impressive achievement, amidst all the hurly-burly, is an intimate, almost internal one. He gets a full, feeling performance from Gwyneth Paltrow as Viola. Up to now I've never seen Paltrow do anything but present the shape and exterior of roles, from Jane Austen's *Emma* to *A Perfect Murder*. With Madden's help, she puts a full-bodied, aching young woman inside her costumes, not only justifying Shakespeare's hunger for Viola but promising much for Paltrow.

Shakespeare is Joseph Fiennes, younger brother of Ralph. Joseph, more slender and dark and willowy than his brother, has had some small parts in films and some large ones in the London theater, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. Now he is (gulp) the bard himself. This is hardly the first time that Shakespeare has been a character in a dramatic work. (Even Bernard Shaw used him—in a one-act play, *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, where he implores Elizabeth to found a national theater.) Still, it can't be a role an actor steps into blithely. His best advantage is that, as Bate tells us, little is really

known about the man's character. Ben Jonson said he was of "an open and free nature," then added that he had

gentle expressions, wherein he flowed with that facility that sometimes it was necessary that he should be stopped. . . . His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been, too.

But this semi-generous description, one of the few accounts that survive, isn't of much relevance to an actor who wants to play a Shakespeare who is a model for his own Romeo.

Fiennes carries the day. He is lithe, strong, hot, with an attractive voice. The part isn't widely varied, so his performance isn't, either; but he moves through this film with the surreal effect of a flashing rapier. His Shakespeare puts the seal on the pact between us and the film. "Very well, this is not fact," we concede. "Then let it be gratifying fiction." And it is.

Hurlyburly

Anthony Drazan

18 January 1999

The time capsule will be chock full. If such a capsule is arranged in the year 2000 to be opened a century later, and if it includes a fair sampling of films that reflect the moral climate of our time, it's going to be crowded. American films about American morals have been plentiful from the beginning, but as the century ends, the graph line is climbing. Just in recent months we've had *Happiness* and *Your Friends and Neighbors* and *Very Bad Things* and *Bad Manners*, among others. Now there's *Hurlyburly*.

If it's argued that these films reflect only a small portion of the population—about as un-Heartland as one could get—it can be countered that this is the way that our time thinks of itself, or at least is tacitly eager to be shocked at itself. Some scholars have argued that Restoration comedy did not truly represent Restoration society; nonetheless, this was at least the theater that the society of the time relished. American morality today is of course much more varied than the films above indicate, but that's the most important point. These films in themselves, quite apart from the question of their verity, are manifests of what filmmakers have seen in one segment of society and what they believe will interest generally. Audiences may be shocked or secretly envious or blasé or even not quite convinced, but the sheer acceptance of these films (and they certainly are accepted) weaves them into the texture of our time.

Hurlyburly, the David Rabe play that was done successfully in several theaters, has been adapted by Rabe himself for the screen, with some opening-up of locale and some thematic emphasis. Most of the picture takes place in the Hollywood Hills house that is shared by two casting agents, Eddie and Mickey; they live fast-lane lives, particularly

Eddie: their friends and their women are items along the freeway. The women in particular are mere items. Eddie, divorced, is a coke-head, though only in greater degree than the others. All these people, consciously or not, spend most of their time rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*. Says Mickey: "We're all going under, so how about a little laugh along the way?" Lest the film audience should be left wondering about the reasons for this nonchalant despair, Rabe introduces what he could do only skimpily in the theater: TV clips of the stupidities and horrors and cruelties of our time. (TV has replaced the telephone as the screenwriter's most essential prop.) These clips make cause-and-effect a bit heavy and pat—the cause was suggested vividly enough in the play—but in any case all of Rabe's characters are presented as products of the *Zeitgeist*, aware of it or not.

Nothing happens in this film. It was true of the play as well, but the film makes it even more evident. This fact, too, is a pan of the *Zeitgeist*: the author's disregard of traditional structure parallels the characters' disregard of traditional values. Incidents occur, both trivial ones and serious ones trivially regarded, but there is no central dramatic action. The film—again like the play—is not about climactic events in Eddie's or Mickey's life: it's principally about the way they live, as laid-back as possible without being laid out. Drugs and sex, quarrels and pathos provide topics of conversation, not much more.

Clearly such a mode demands interesting conversation, and Rabe generally makes it good. But the film outstays its welcome. The last section, a sort of coda between Eddie and a girl who returns after a long absence, is attenuated. It feels as if Rabe knows he has struck the richest vein of his writing life—this play-film is his best work that I know—and is reluctant to let it go because he may never get another as rich. Also, attractively inflated though the language is, Rabe dishes out the rhetoric too impartially. Most of the characters speak alike. It's all very well for Eddie to say: "We have just verified, and I mean scientifically, the bitch has been proven to basically hate all men. She doesn't need to hate me in particular—she already hates me in the fucking abstract." Eddie is apparently a somewhat cultivated man. But the roughest character in the film says things like "Hey, if I have overstepped some invisible boundary here, you notify me fast because I respond quickly to clear-cut information while, you know, murk and innuendo make me totally demented." And there's more like that.

One member of the cast was a poor choice. Garry Shandling, a popular TV comic, plays Artie, a friend. (Artie drops in with a sixteen-year-old girl, Donna, who has been living with him for a while. "You want her?" he asks Mickey, and leaves her in the house "like a CARE package.") Shandling has occasionally appeared as an actor but, so far, only appears to be one. Anna Paquin, who made her debut at nine in *The Piano*, does well enough as Donna, a bland, homeless, amoral waif. Robin Wright Penn is haunting once again as a troubled girlfriend of Eddie's; Meg Ryan is painfully cheerful as a hooker accustomed to abuse.

The three principal men shine. In a sense, two of them succeeded before the shooting started. Chazz Palminteri, the rough friend, apparently just needs to show up in

order to be forceful, commanding. Kevin Spacey, as Mickey, is a much more skilled actor, but he, too, has become a presence who wins just by being there. We want to like Spacey as soon as he appears. Spacey, we should note, had a head start on the role: he understudied Mickey in the New York production of the play in 1984.

Sean Penn, too, had a head start. He played Eddie in a California production that was directed by Rabe in 1988, and he keeps going here. Eddie is not the pivotal character in any structural sense, but it is the biggest part and Penn has its measure. It's easy enough for an actor to simulate the progressive effects of coke-sniffing; Penn makes the coke-sniffing man a kind of fugitive—impatient, pathetic up to a point, quietly panicked. Penn showed talent as a writer-director in *The Indian Runner*, and he has consistently been a feral actor. Pessimistic as one may be about the film world, it's hard not to hope high for him.

Anthony Drazan's direction presumably reflects the advice of Rabe, who tells us, in the published play, that his own production differed from the first one (by Mike Nichols). In any case, Drazan makes the film seem fairly hot news from the front of lush, sterile living. He is greatly helped by Dylan Tichenor, the responsive editor. Together with the smoothly meshed cast, they give *Hurlyburly* its ultimate reason for being, its basic tone: wry dissolution.

The Thin Red Line

Terrence Malick

25 January 1999

Terrence Malick has acquired a peculiar mystique. After graduating from Harvard and attending Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, he became a journalist, taught philosophy for a short time at M.I.T., then studied at the American Film Institute's center in Los Angeles. He was first visible as the author of *Pocket Money* (1972), the eccentric, easy-going Western with Paul Newman and Lee Marvin that was a chuckly delight. In 1973 he wrote and directed *Badlands*, about a serial killer and his teenage girlfriend, which managed to link the immense physical space of the Dakota badlands with the immense moral emptiness in the protagonist. Then, in 1978, came *Days of Heaven*, about a Chicago steelworker in the Woodrow Wilson era who runs off to the West with his girlfriend and his sister, a film that drowned drama in a great wash of physical beauty. Then, from Malick, nothing. For twenty years, nothing—except an occasional rumor of activity. The peculiarity of his career is that his very inactivity created a sort of aura around him. A man of his intelligence? thought the film world. Of his demonstrated talent? Doing nothing? That's interesting. More: it's promising. Let us wait and hope.

The wait is over. After a twenty-year silence, here is *The Thin Red Line*, which Malick adapted from the James Jones novel and directed. Almost as if to justify his long silence, Malick has made it a (nearly) three-hour film. His subject is certainly of perennial

concern: battle—in this case, infantrymen on Guadalcanal. Jones, in the sardonic dedication of his novel, wrote:

This book is cheerfully dedicated to those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement, and adrenal stimulation that we need. . . .

Naturally, Malick has tried to plunge through to the harsh reality on which Jones's line was grim decor.

First we see a Melanesian village, idyllic, to which a few U.S. soldiers have fled. They are caught and taken back, forgiven for being AWOL presumably because they are needed in the invasion of Guadalcanal (in August 1942). Which soon begins. We follow members of one company, C-for-Charlie, concentrating on the next twenty-four hours as they go ashore, make their way cautiously through fields, then meet deadly fire as they near a hill—crowned with a Japanese bunker that they have been ordered to take. A last sequence, after a rest period, deals with another dangerous advance.

The battle scenes are filled with bloody detail, including the horrific sufferings of the wounded, as, despite the protests of the captain, the company is again ordered by their colonel to take that hill and silence that bunker. Jones's ironic dedication floats through our heads as the ghastly butchery slams on: battle is viscerally exciting. (Note: Malick makes the same editing mistake here that Spielberg made in the otherwise masterly D-Day sequence in *Saving Private Ryan*. He inserts some shots from behind enemy machine-gunners as they fire down on the advancing Americans. These shots are not only superfluous, they spoil the unitary point of view—our participation in the American advance.) But that excitement is basic with any adequately done film battle. And Malick gives us no more of the murderous inanity of some military objectives than was in John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill*, no more of the ghastly grind of front-line life than was in Oliver Stone's *Platoon*.

Malick wants to deepen his battle sequences; so he counterpoints the carnage with reminders of eternal nature, inside of which this mortal bloodiness is boiling. He interweaves shots of flowers, birds, animals, tranquil skies (often seen through tree branches), tropical birds cooing on a bough, even a hen scurrying with her chicks as a symbol of care and survival. On the sound track Malick frequently splices in the thoughts and memories of the soldiers, to show that these are not mere automata in uniform but vessels of humanity.

But it is precisely with these contrapuntal strands of huge, timeless nature, of the complexity of every human mind, that Malick bloats his film into banality. We hardly need numerous reminders that birds are somewhere cooing even while battles rage and that nature will outlast the wars of any particular moment. (David Lean did it in one shot, the close of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* where the jungle blotted out the military disaster.) As for the thoughts of the infantrymen that we hear, they are the epitome of patronizing simplicity. "Where does war come from?" is one of the thoughts we hear. Another: "Where does love come from?" Another, in the Southern drawl that films con-

stantly use for religious folk: “What keeps us from reachin’ out and graspin’ the glory?”

Much of the casting is unhelpful. Many of the men in Charlie Company look and sound like one another, and even if this was intentional—to dramatize the depersonalization of the army—it works against the individuality sought in the sound track thoughts. The more vivid actors are not served well. Sean Penn as a sergeant gets little chance to use his talent. Woody Harrelson as another sergeant does adequately a death scene that dozens of actors have done before him. John Travolta (in a silly moustache) and George Clooney appear in small parts that stand out as Movieland cameos. The best performance comes from Nick Nolte, but he has the best part, a by-the-book colonel who thinks only in terms of military objectives. And Nolte is freighted with a speech—on the battlefield—to a junior officer about the humiliation of being passed over for promotion all his life and how he means to take advantage of the possible advancement provided at last by “his” war.

The most disappointing aspect of *The Thin Red Line* is that its humane intentions smack of arrogance. Malick waited twenty years to move and then decided to make the definitive war epic, the film that would at last tell us the truth about military principles and stupidities, about human strength and fallibility, the ultimate rendition of war for which he apparently thought we had all been waiting. But the film he has given us is not large, only distended, so trite in its ideas and cinematic methods that it patronizes.

Malick includes a quotation from Homer in Greek. (Perhaps to buttress the Malick mystique, the intellectual-as-filmmaker.) He includes a crocodile and a snake, reminders that even nature has its perils. He stretches to include a “Dear John” letter, in which a sweetheart or wife back home informs a soldier that she has found another man. He includes a second, post-climactic firefight that does little more than prolong the picture. A host of inclusions, all seemingly ticked off carefully. What Malick has not included, after twenty years of cogitation, is any urgent reason for this film to exist.

Affliction

Paul Schrader

1 February 1999

New England. Winter. Snowy countryside, skies black with cold. Hardbitten folk, surviving. *Ethan Frome*. *Way Down East*. Ah, it’s good to be back in that barren landscape, so fertile for American drama.

Affliction was adapted from a Russell Banks novel by Paul Schrader, who then directed. Another Banks novel, *The Sweet Hereafter*, set in much the same climate and terrain, became a haunting film in 1997. Paul Sarossy, who shot that picture, is also the cinematographer here, with the same ability to make the snow seem part of interiors and to make the exteriors, even with flakes falling, seem no less habitable than warm rooms. Schrader’s last notable work, adapted by Harold Pinter from Ian McEwan, was set in the

voluptuary Venice of *The Comfort of Strangers*; here Schrader suffuses his film with the smell of wet wool and cheap whiskey and cigarette smoke in the cabs of pickup trucks.

In this atmosphere lives Wade Whitehouse, sole policeman of a small town, separated from his (remarried) wife and their small daughter. He loves the child but bungles her visits with him. He bungles relations with lots of people he would really like to get on with. He is a big man, given to spurts of violence that are almost expected of him by now. Hovering—more than hovering—in the background is his father, as big as he is and even more of a drinker, more violent. Wade has a brother, Rolfe, who (unexplained, though he comes from precisely the same background) is a professor in Boston. Rolfe is from time to time a commentator, through voice-overs, on the story we watch. That story begins with a seemingly accidental death on the first day of the deer-hunting season; from this death, events then lead to Wade's loss of his job, his involvement in more deaths, and his eventual disappearance from the town and from everybody's ken.

Schrader deploys this decline and fall before us enticingly enough to tease us into "if only." We keep wanting to reach into the screen to stop foolish actions. This is a tribute to the director and his actors, because most of these characters, as such, are not deeply interesting, and the overall motion of the story is early manifest. But the principal performances, by Nick Nolte as Wade and James Coburn as his sodden ultra-macho father, provide the film with a rock-hard texture that commands attention. Nolte in particular keeps reaching into niches of feeling that give his blustery brute some poignancy—no small achievement for a character who pulls his own aching tooth with a pair of pliers, swirls some whiskey around his mouth, then keeps going.

In fact, Nolte and Coburn are so powerful that they distort what, we are told, is the story's theme. Both men are physically huge. (Willem Dafoe, as Rolfe, Wade's professor-brother, is not.) We sense that these two men are so strong that they get impatient with restraining that strength, that they seek or contrive occasions just to cut loose. But at the end we get a moralizing voice-over from Rolfe to the effect that what we have witnessed was an instance of a father passing on to a son a tradition of wife-abuse. This is not what we have seen. *Affliction* is about a stratum of society trapped in a societal jet lag, a frontier ethos marooned in a more complex world. Women are used and abused by such men, of course, but so—as we see more often—are other men. And size, the sheer surge of the power to vent impatience and frustration on others, aggravates the trouble. (Perhaps it's because I'm only 5'8¼" that I burrowed out this subtext; still, it seems pertinent to the picture.) Thus, with hardly one sympathetic or admirable action, Nolte's Wade becomes somewhat pathetic.

Private Confessions

Liv Ullmann

1 February 1999

What a great relief it was to see *Private Confessions*. (The U.S. premiere was at the Film Forum in New York.) This screenplay, directed by Liv Ullmann, was adapted by Ingmar Bergman from his book of the same name published in 1966; and, aside from anything else, this screenplay is a genuine Bergman work. The last Bergman film shown here, for a few times only, was a 118-minute TV piece called *In the Presence of a Clown*, which he both wrote and directed—a loose and maundering ramble about a psychiatric patient. *Clown* was so flabby, so devoid of Bergman intensity, that it left one viewer worried about its seventy-nine-year-old maker. But *Private Confessions*, though he didn't direct it, is Bergman again.

He has called his three books about his parents “novels.” (The two earlier ones were *Sunday's Children* and *The Best Intentions*. Both of them he adapted for the screen, and both were directed by others.) The general facts about his parents' marriage were already well known, but perhaps the tag of fiction gave him the license he felt he needed to write dialogue and actions that occurred before he was born—in some scenes he is present in his mother's womb—or when he was a child.

Private Confessions consists of five conversations. Anna Bergman, the author's mother, is in all of them; Henrik, her clergyman-husband, Tomas, her seminarian-lover, and Uncle Jacob, her religious guide and confessor, appear in the others, though only one at a time. The first conversation is in 1925 in Stockholm. The others follow after differing time-lapses—a few weeks, ten years—except that the last scene is set back in 1907, in Upsala, when the seventeen-year-old Anna is to make her first communion with Uncle Jacob.

Marriage, love, desire, ego, honor—all these are materials of the conversations, not new in the Bergman canon but addressed here with the same Strindbergian candor as before. Anna makes her way through life, reconciling passion with responsibility. The two most interesting aspects of the screenplay are intrinsic and extrinsic. First, when Anna confesses her affair to Uncle Jacob, the advice he gives her turns out to be poor, and she conceals this dire result from him, to help maintain his status as sage both for his sake and hers. Second is Bergman's persistent concern with the marriage and sexual lives of his parents. Many artists have treated this subject (e.g., Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers*), but Bergman is absolutely captivated by it. He seems to have saved it up for his old age. Clergymen and their private lives figured in some of his earlier work, but they were Bergman's contemporaries. Since he virtually gave up film directing, he has concentrated on his parents. It can't quite be said that *Private Confessions* opens up vast new realms in the material, but its honesty and perception are absorbing.

Sven Nykvist, the magical cinematographer of many Bergman films, here apostrophizes Bergman's favorite subject, the human face. Liv Ullmann surely has relied on Nykvist, though this is her third directing assignment. We are asked not to assume that

she had advice from the script's author. In any case she has aimed, with much success, at the Bergman ideal of filling space between two people with almost visible thought and feeling.

Pernilla August once again plays Anna. She is sound and true, but we can't help thinking that, except for the passage of some decades, the director herself might be playing the role and with more delicacy. Samuel Froler is Henrik again, making clear both why Anna married him and why the marriage is troubled. The treasure, however, is Max von Sydow as Uncle Jacob, first elderly, then ancient, then, in the last scene—the prologue-epilogue—only middle-aged. Make-up and costume don't make von Sydow's changes. Genius does.

Dr. Akagi

Shohei Imamura

8 February 1999

Shohei Imamura strives on. Now seventy-two, he presents his twenty-fifth film, *Dr. Akagi*, which hurtles, jostles, stings, and insists just as much as most of the previous fifteen or so by this Japanese verist that I have seen. One of them, *Vengeance Is Mine*, about a (Catholic) serial killer, is a near-masterpiece. Some of them, like *Pigs and Battleships*, are heavy-handed. Most of them, like *Black Rain* and *A Man Vanishes* and *The Pornographers*, are somewhat uneven but quite unforgettable. The fact that the last-named is not about sex but about a man who makes sex films—its Japanese title translates as *An Introduction to Anthropology*—is a considerable hint toward the core of this artist, who is a blend of Zola and fierce cultural nationalism.

Several of his films deal with Japan during and just after World War II. *Black Rain* is about the after-effects of the atomic bombs. The new film, *Dr. Akagi*, is set in 1945 and travels in time through the news of the German surrender to Hiroshima. The title character is a middle-aged physician in a remote locality, trying to minister to his many patients with reduced supplies and increased demands on his time. Imamura's father was a doctor, but a successful one in Tokyo, nothing like Dr. Akagi, whom we first see running. Literally running. In his white suit and bow tie and straw hat, he runs through village streets and down country roads, carrying his little bag, on his way to patients. We often see him running. (At the risk of self-congratulation I note that Dr. Akagi reminded me of Kurosawa's slum doctor in *Drunken Angel*, and I subsequently read that, when Imamura was a young man, he was turned to filmmaking by seeing *Drunken Angel*.)

But this is no lachrymose portrait of a lovable country doc. Dr. Akagi is too busy for loveliness, too entwined in the fears and fantasies caused by the war and the defeat that is foreseen. His chief concern medically is hepatitis, of which there is an epidemic along with insufficient medicines. He becomes known as "Dr. Liver," and is summoned to a medical conference in Tokyo where he presents his views. The physicians applaud him,

though little can be done at the moment to deal with the disease.

But *Dr. Akagi* is much more than the story of this doctor's medical struggles. Also involved in his story are his assistant, a young woman who adores him; a younger doctor in the town who is a morphine addict; the prevalence and acceptance of prostitution as economic need; the sexual fancies of the local military commander; the presence of Allied prisoners in a nearby camp; the sheltering of an escaped prisoner, a Dutchman with whom the doctor converses in German and who helps him with his experiments; and the punishment of the doctor for his protection of the prisoner.

Some of the film is splintery. The screenplay by Imamura and Daisuke Tengan, from a novel by Ango Sakaguchi, sometimes seems to be sweeping up incidentals as it moves along, the way a flooding stream sweeps up materials along the way. The ending is a reminder that Imamura can lean heavily on symbols, as he did in his last picture, *The Eel*. Here in this seaside village the symbol is a whale who is sighted a few moments before the doctor and his assistant see the mushroom cloud. But Imamura is so generally persuasive that we tend to shrug at his gauche moments. He leaves us with a sense of immersion in a *Zeitgeist* far from our own experience—fascinating.

That immersion is accomplished through art, not bald factual detail. Akira Emoto, who literally runs through the title role, manages to convey honesty and authority as he does so. And Imamura has once again found a cinematographer—in this case Shigero Komatsubara, who did *The Eel*—to fulfill his visual intent: to transform, without aesthetic fuss, the commonplace into the iconic.

The Children of Heaven

Majid Majidi

22 February 1999

Some of the best Iranian films of recent years have dealt with children, *Where Is the Friend's House?* and *The White Balloon* among them. It's common knowledge that children have often been used as subjects in Iran because filmmakers there can deal with them honestly without running into censorship. Well, it's an ill wind. Several of these films were lovely.

Majid Majidi wrote and directed *The Children of Heaven* with the same quiet grace and reticence that has marked his compatriots' work. The story stretches simplicity about as far as it can go and still survive. In Tehran a little boy loses his younger sister's sneakers, and since the family can't afford to replace them, the two children share one pair of sneakers according to their own carefully devised plan. The climax is a race in which the boy is out to win a pair of sneakers. But what fascinates much more than the story is the way in which the two children are drawn.

Small children are, of course, mirrors of their parents and their immediate society. The boy in *Gloria*, who was brought up in a loving home, not a criminal nest, is none-

theless one more wisened-up, precocious American movie kid who can banter with grown-ups. The brother and sister in *Children* are certainly not angelic, but they reflect a grave and winning decorum in their parents and their community. Allow for the strong possibility that both the American and the Iranian children have been in some degree devised to please domestic audiences, and it's still an interesting contrast.

The press notes for *The Children of Heaven* include quotations on the subject of children from a documentary about ten Iranian filmmakers. Two of these men say that they have stopped making films about children, that more variety is now possible, but all of them agree that, intrinsically, making films about children was less a restriction than an opportunity. "You can only find the hope and passion for life in children," says one man. These directors may have been making the best of a straitened situation; nonetheless, if children in a modern American film behaved like these Iranian children, we would all be doubled up with disbelief.

The Dreamlife of Angels

Erick Zonca

22 March 1999

How did he do it? The question persists after *The Dreamlife of Angels*. Not one story element is fresh, the theme is familiar in any purview of modern society, yet this French film is completely absorbing, almost rudely poignant. How did the director, Erick Zonca, do it? The answer is both simple and deep. He paid no attention to predecessors or echoes: he just wanted, overwhelmingly, to make this film. If he worried about familiarity at all, he clearly felt that his conviction would overwhelm reminders of other films. He was right.

This is Zonca's first feature film—he had made three shorts—yet he wasn't exactly a stripling in 1997 when he wrote it (with Roger Bohbot) and directed it. Born in Orléans in 1956, he went to Paris when he was sixteen to study acting and at twenty moved on to New York to continue acting studies. He didn't enter the film world until he returned to France when he was thirty. He found success with his short films, which is to say he won awards, so he was enabled to make a feature.

The story consists of events, not a plot. Isa is twenty years old, on the road, rucksack on her back, traveling because she doesn't want to melt into conventional life. She arrives in Lille, is offered a sewing job on a machine in an assembly line, and accepts it to raise some cash. She is soon fired for inefficiency, but meets a local girl, Marie, who has much the same alienation from burrow life. Marie is apartment-sitting for a woman and her daughter who were gravely injured in a car crash, and she permits Isa to stay with her.

They apply for waitress work but are offered only sandwich-board jobs. Isa accepts. Two men happen along, bouncers at a club, and they all become friends. Marie sleeps

with her gent. Then she meets Chriss, a rich young man who owns a couple of clubs, and she really falls for him, responding warmly to his skilled seducings.

Meanwhile, Isa has been reading the diaries in the apartment of the girl who lives there and who is comatose in the hospital. (The girl's mother has died by now.) Isa is fascinated, is drawn to the girl, visits her often. Though the girl is quite unconscious, Isa has a sense, because of the diaries, of connection with her. The odd overtone suggested is that the inert girl has achieved a state that Isa almost envies: to be in the world but safe from it.

Marie's affair with Chriss heats up—for both of them, she thinks, but she is wrong. The results are dire. At the end Isa doesn't hit the road again with her rucksack: she takes a job somewhere else much like the one from which she was fired at the start.

If there is a cellophane-wrapped moral in the film, probably it's that the world is too much with us, late and soon, but that in trying not to get and spend, we can lay waste our powers. Still, though this is hinted, the film doesn't stay within that theme's boundaries. It's simply about two young women and some things that happen to them. The real vitality of the film, beneath any adage, is that Zonca cares greatly about Isa and Marie. He worries about them, almost frets about them, chuckles at them, consoles them, is sometimes grieved by them. He is so involved with them that the film allows not a millimeter in which we can doubt that they exist.

Zonca is tremendously justified by Élodie Bouchez (Isa) and Natacha Régnier (Marie), both of whom have previously appeared in films but who have life faces, not film faces. (Minnie Driver as against Michelle Pfeiffer, let's say.) Zonca states that his experience as an actor helped him in his work with Bouchez and Régnier, and they have quite evidently benefited from him. The film exudes an intimacy with the lives of women that such a director as Chantal Akerman evokes in her work. Or that Alain Tanner captured in *La Salamandre*, another account of a young woman's struggle against drowning in the humdrum.

And, to cite one more reference, the very last sequence is a reminder of *Il Posto*. At the end of Ermanno Olmi's *agon* of a young man being ground into job-burger, rows of men at their desks are drizzling their lives away at grubby routines. At the end of Zonca's film, the camera moves along from Isa's bench in her new job to the faces of other young women stitching away like her. Are we to infer that Isa is either defeated or "adjusted" like her co-workers here? Well, society needs goods and these women need jobs; still, we're allowed to suspect that the world and the human race were not created in order to put these young lives at these machines.

Lastly, the film's title. We see neither dreamlife nor angels; yet it seems reductive to read the title as merely ironic. There is much more in the picture than the obvious fact that the young women are not angels. Perhaps the title suggests that human beings are burdened with dissatisfactions, often inchoate, and that this fact is our best virtue. In any case, whatever the title means, we can all hope that Zonca is thinking of other characters for whom he cares as passionately as he does for Isa and Marie.

Devil's Island

Fridrik Thor Fridriksson

12 April 1999

A week in Iceland in 1972 was full of surprises, most of them pleasant. Particularly pleasant was the country's attitude toward the theater. The National Theater in Reykjavik, the only professional company, was well-supported and did admirable work; and the amateur theaters, in various towns, were given some subsidy, engaged professional directors from abroad, and did productions that were held to high standards.

Film, indigenous film, was a rarity. (I saw only one picture while I was there, *M*A*S*H*. I had already seen it at home, but in Reykjavik it had Icelandic subtitles and I wanted the experience. I got it: long speeches—in English, of course—accompanied by only three or four Icelandic words in a subtitle. Still, the audience laughed a lot. Maybe many of them knew English.) Inevitably the situation has changed since 1972. Iceland now has a film industry, even if only a small one, and that industry has joined the world community by having severe money troubles, just like its bigger brothers elsewhere.

The leader of the film community is a forty-four-year-old director named Fridrik Thor Fridriksson. Fridrik—in Iceland everyone is called by his or her first name and is so listed in the phone book—has some international reputation. An earlier film of his, *Cold Fever*, which I missed, was shown here recently, and now comes *Devil's Island*.

The title doesn't refer to the French penal colony but to Fridrik's homeland. Based on a novel by Einar Karason, who adapted it himself, the picture is more interesting as an example of a global phenomenon than otherwise. Many, many countries have, so to speak, made this film. For instance, a New Zealand picture called *Once Were Warriors* dealt with a Maori family living in slum conditions outside Auckland and was a drama of cultural transition, if not deterioration. *Devil's Island* informs the world that Iceland is not lagging behind in class struggles.

Set in the 1950s, *Devil's Island* presents Icelandic families living in Quonset huts outside Reykjavik, huts that were once U.S. Army barracks and are now being used to house the local poor. At the start a U.S. Army officer is marrying an Icelandic woman and taking her back to the States. The film is streaked throughout with references to the U.S., especially the music, especially Elvis Presley. Dreams of America haunt the younger folk. Twenty years after this era, I was told that what Icelandic people resented most about the U.S. military bases was the American influence on pure Icelandic language and culture, and *Devil's Island* gives us a dollop of that influence taking hold.

The characters are a predictable assortment, featuring a discontented, hard-drinking young man who has visited America and comes home lacquered with American pop. Now he does little but hang out with layabout friends and get in trouble, much to the dismay of his religious grandma and hardworking grandpa. Nothing that happens in the film is greatly moving or interesting, other than the fact that Fridrik and colleagues felt that this Icelandic version of international class alteration needed to be made.

Two aspects, however, are remarkable. First, the cinematography by Ari Kristins-

son. (Every Icelandic male's surname consists of his father's first name followed by "son," every female's surname is her father's first name followed by "dóttir." Thus a brother and sister have different surnames—but they are called by their first names anyway!) Ari catches so exactly the leaden skies and general slushiness in the slum area that after a while my socks began to feel damp. And the actors are all better than competent. I remembered the Icelandic theater productions I had seen and recognized that, in this minuscule country so jealous of its culture, a long-nurtured tradition of good acting had apparently just been waiting for a film industry to begin.

EdTV

Ron Howard

26 April–3 May 1999

Television, it seems, is here to stay—not just as a medium but as a topic. TV is now so intertwined with our lives that we almost feel visually altered. A film director once revealed to me the penalty of his profession: he saw everything everywhere in terms of shots. The penalty we're paying for TV, merely as audience, is the sense of being engulfed by it. Everything we see has been or will be on TV: we live and move through a landscape of TV locations. Other twentieth-century arrivals—film, radio, the automobile—have greatly altered dreams and habits, but nothing other than TV has so insidiously swamped our selves, our homes. No wonder we're interested in the subject.

The film world has been pondering TV ever since the small screen came into being. This was inevitable, not just because film cannot completely exclude a phenomenon that floods our lives but because of film's physical-kinetic similarity. Writers have to write about TV with words; film—because it, too, is a succession of photographs on a screen—can comment on TV with basically the same means. (TV, however, does little through its images to comment on film.)

This connection, long familiar to Hollywood, is being pressed these days. Lately we've had *Pleasantville*, in which two modern teenagers enter a forty-year-old TV series, and *The Truman Show*, in which a man unknowingly lives his life on TV while everyone around him is an actor in the show of which he is the unwitting star. Now there's *EdTV*, in which a man is watched and heard continuously by TV cameras and mikes. Here he not only knows about the TV, he applied for the job. *The Truman Show*, for all its bite, struggled to remain credible; *EdTV* is so credible that it struggles another way—to escape predictability.

A brassy TV executive (played by Ellen DeGeneres) gets the idea of putting a TV crew into the life of an ordinary bloke, day and night. (My first reaction: she must have seen *The Truman Show* and has thought of a way to develop it.) Auditions are held, and a video-shop clerk named Ed Pekurny (Matthew McConaughey) applies. He gets the "part"—just to live his life with cameras and mikes in attendance all the time. At first the

show gets only a mild response; Ed, family, and friends are conscious of being watched. But as they get used to being “on” all the time, and as privacies get more and more fractured, the show’s ratings zoom. Ed gets renewed month after month, the show becomes a national hit, other TV shows and every kind of print medium are soaked in its success.

The screenplay, by Lowell Ganz and Babaloo Mandel, based on a French film, has enough sharp gags and plot twists to sustain it, with an ending that manages to be nice. Ron Howard, who directed *The Paper*, a lively look at another medium, makes every moment count. With the help of his editors, Mike Gill and Dan Hanley, Howard creates counterpoints to the main story—recurrent shots of differing sorts of viewers as they become totally absorbed in the loves and other difficulties of Ed, his brother and mother, his mother’s second husband, and her first husband, who returns because of the show.

Those viewers, in various homes or offices or gathered in the street to watch Ed arrive at his girlfriend’s house, are the real gist of the film. Those viewers virtually canonize Ed and the other people in his life, with a fervor that rings too true for either comfort or dismissal. Years ago, in the days when TV was just becoming a staple of consciousness, I saw a weather reporter in a restaurant, a young woman whose sole job was to read weather forecasts a couple of times a day on a TV news program. An older woman came up to her, seized her hand, and congratulated her on the “wonderful work” she was doing. The older woman may not have realized just how precisely she was speaking: she was in the presence of what was to her a wonder. I’ll never forget how that older woman held the weather woman’s hand in both of her hands, as if she were being blessed by this contact, a blessing that could be passed down to her children and grandchildren. That older woman was actually touching someone whom she had seen, and would see again, on the screen.

Like that elderly woman, the viewers in this film are enraptured by Ed, not especially because of anything he does but because he does it on the screen. He has gone through that screen like Alice through the looking glass, still the same Ed but miraculously exalted just by transposition. Thus Ed’s TV show is a further erasure of the difference between art and life, a notable activity of the century now closing. And thus Ed’s TV show is an insidious form of consolation. Our lives can’t be so bad, think many, if a life so much like ours is on television.

Everything costs something. We don’t know yet what TV will cost because we don’t begin to know everything it can do. Pandora’s box had nothing on that living-room box. In public terms, TV is a half-century old, and as yet we have small idea of how it will affect every aspect of our world. Still, as *EdTV* and the other recent films suggest, we certainly know we’re in several kinds of transit. Politics is the most obvious plane of change; more than that, our very genes seem to contain secrets implanted by TV. What will we give birth to?

In any event, no slouching towards Bethlehem here. This birth will be prime-time stuff.

The Winslow Boy

David Mamet

24 May 1999

Bravo—warm if limited—for David Mamet. This dramatist of the American growl, this winnower of the mythic from the grunts of Chicago, this feral explorer of today's counterfeits, has aligned himself with—of all periods and places—Georgian England, and in most ways he has justified his choice. Few playwrights of this century are more alien to Mamet's familiar world than the natty Terence Rattigan, Mayfair's erstwhile ambassador to the muses, and few plays are more remote from Mamet in ethos and structure than Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy*, which Mamet has now adapted and directed.

Set in London just before World War I, the play is based on a historical incident that occurred a decade or so earlier. Rattigan trimmed and tailored the facts, turning them into a drama of which Pinero would have been proud, a theatrical structure that perfectly fit its period and theme. And this is the work, produced in the mid-1940s in London and New York and filmed in 1948, that attracted the author of *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *House of Games*.

The story is of the Winslow family, living in South Kensington in 1912; father, who is a retired bank manager, and mother and three children: Catherine, a suffragette, Dickie, at Oxford when he bothers to attend, and the youngest, Ronnie, who is a thirteen-year-old cadet in the Royal Naval College at Osbourne. Ronnie is accused by the college of stealing a postal order, worth five shillings, from another cadet; he is expelled. Winslow *père* believes Ronnie's protestations of innocence. He then goes through a long, wearing, and expensive series of legal moves until the wrong is righted in an unusual trial; but the process costs Winslow his health and modest wealth, costs Dickie his Oxford education and Catherine her very proper army fiancé. Still, right has been done.

For my leaky self, I admit that I began to sob—at the Broadway play fifty years ago, at the earlier film, and at Mamet's film—when Winslow asks Ronnie, just returned from school, to tell him the truth of the matter. The father says he will not punish the boy if he stole the order, but he will not forgive the boy if he lies. As Ronnie denies the theft, we can see the whole drama wheeling into place, the magnificent engine of one man's struggle for right against the armory of state. Citizen Winslow will challenge the British Empire's wrong to his son. How wonderful it is to be in at the beginning of a fight for right that, we know, is going to end with affirmation of principle. This is what a fairy tale should be, and, oddly enough, it's all the more fantastical because most of it actually did happen.

Mamet has said several times that he was drawn to Rattigan's play because he thinks it an excellent melodrama. I don't know what he means. For example, there is no villain in the piece. Not even the great faceless force of English law can be so construed. The visible action of the play entirely concerns sympathetic people—chiefly Winslow and his daughter, who are determined to see the matter through. The one somewhat theatrical personage, the brilliant barrister Sir Robert Morton, who accepts Ronnie's case, is

credibly histrionic: it is his profession. No, not the plotty kicks of melodrama here but a robust, old-fashioned, well-made drama. Richard Gilman said once that the well-made play reflects a basic belief that our world is well-made. Hence *The Winslow Boy*. Anyway, Mamet was moved by it, and he moves us. He has condensed the play more than (as I recall) Rattigan himself did for the 1948 film, but he leaves no doubt about the gravamen of the piece.

Mamet's real triumph, however, is in his directing. Like every good director, he has "seen" the picture before he made it; and he saw it as a piece with the intimacy and physicality of a play that nonetheless flowed like cinema. From the very beginning Mamet keeps his camera relatively close to his actors—not in close-up but in proximity to people whom he views as flesh and blood, not shadows, and his framing often uses the limited yet fertile depth of stage compositions instead of the possible vastness of the screen. For instance, an important sequence takes place in Sir Robert Morton's chambers. Mamet keeps the door open, and through it, as the drama progresses in the foreground, we see Sir Robert's clerk waiting, slightly out of focus. Later, when needed, the clerk steps into the room and into focus. This simple ingenuity gives the room depth without distortion and (something that Renoir occasionally does) provides an almost choreographic touch as the clerk steps forward into focus.

Then there's sound. Recently I quoted Robert Bresson's belief that sound gives the screen a third dimension. Note how Mamet uses off-screen sounds—the mob in the street outside the Winslow house, often heard but not often seen—thus amplifying the dimensions of the film with a theater device.

Most of Mamet's casting is right on the mark. Nigel Hawthorne, the veteran who is best known here for *The Madness of King George*, plays Arthur Winslow with rich complexity—the middle-class English *paterfamilias* who takes his responsibilities with some relish. Gemma Jones, so poised and patient as Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, is once again a reticent pillar of strength as Mrs. Winslow. Matthew Pidgeon is passable as the lightweight Dickie, and Guy Edwards as Ronnie, apparently chosen because Mamet didn't want an obtrusively winning boy in the role, is unobtrusive. Aden Gillett, who looks as if he were in uniform even when he's in civvies, functions well as Catherine's departing fiancé. And Jeremy Northam, who was a depressing fizzle as an American gangster chief in *Gloria*, wipes out that flop with his elegant, incisive Sir Robert. I wouldn't bet that Northam (and Mamet) never looked at Robert Donat's performance in the earlier film, but any actor who can even remind us of Donat deserves applause. Northam seems a bit young to play a celebrated barrister; presumably Mamet wanted to cast the role appropriately "opposite" his Catherine.

This brings us to an unavoidable delicate matter. Mamet has cast his wife, Rebecca Pidgeon, as Catherine. She is inadequate. Better here than I have seen her before, Pidgeon shows some actor's intelligence and intent, but she lacks the color and power to fulfill what she may perceive in the role. Mamet used his previous wife, Lindsay Crouse, in some of his plays and in the leading role of *House of Games*, and, without stellar scintillation, she at least supplied what was essential. Now Mamet is employing his present

wife, Pidgeon, a product of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art who adds no luster to that institution or to her husband's work. I have seen her in two Mamet plays and two previous Mamet films (*Homicide* and *The Spanish Prisoner*), and her Catherine confirms a sad impression: she is unequipped for the prominence that he gives her. These remarks are obviously not an intrusion into the Mamets' private life; I'm dealing with the public manifestation of their private affinity. To put it with maximum permissible bluntness, his loyalty to his wife, which leads him to misjudge her talent, is marring his work.

Ironically, the very last shot of the film, which is a close-up of Pidgeon, crowns Mamet's directing triumph here. How simple it is, yet how striking and imaginative. Sir Robert, when he leaves the Winslow house after the trial, makes a gently provocative remark to Catherine. Mamet doesn't pull the camera up or away for a conventional finish, with Catherine in the garden. He just fastens on her pleased reaction as the picture ends. Excellent.

All in all, *The Winslow Boy* is good news. This is the first time that Mamet has directed something that is not his own original work. He is so successful—with the large exception noted above—that he now has us hoping he'll adapt and direct something else that we couldn't possibly predict.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Michael Hoffman

31 May 1999

In the midst of the action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck stops to pee. This is not even the low point of the film.

Michael Hoffman adapted the play to the screen and directed it. Hoffman's dossier includes, among other pictures, a bright modern comedy-romance, *One Fine Day*, and a heavy period drama, *Restoration*. Much of the time, his version of the *Dream* is almost a contest between these two types. But this contest is swallowed in a larger struggle that, scene by scene, foot by foot, ensnares most films of Shakespeare—a struggle that might as well be inscribed on the screen as a supertitle: "Please, audience! We know it's Shakespeare; but see how we're trying to keep it from being dull."

Very few Shakespeare films have been free of this subtext—most notably, Branagh's work—but Branagh's passion for the plays, and his experience with them, flowed from the stage on to the screen to produce new incarnations rather than cultural obeisance by movies to classics. And for the most part Branagh was supported by actors who relished the chance to do in a new form what they had always loved doing; they weren't entering a strange, intimidating obstacle race.

This new film shows no sign of the (let's call it) Branagh attitude. It seems, though of course this is supposition, that Hoffman and his producers, after deciding to film the play, surely out of love for it, faced the frightening fact—revealed in that invisible super-

title—that they were actually daring to put Shakespeare on film. Then they had to face another present-day stern injunction about Shakespeare that applies either on stage or film: to do something to the play. First, obviously, the setting. Who would care about a film set in and near ancient Athens? Even Shakespeare’s Elizabethanized ancient Athens? Damned few. Where to set it, then? Among foreign countries—and it had to be abroad—which was the most “in”? No question: Italy. And which part of Italy? Again, no question: Tuscany. And what about all the references to Athens in the text? Simple: they invented a Tuscan town called Monte Athena. (Many of the exteriors were actually shot in Montepulciano, which, incidentally, was Henry James’s favorite town in Tuscany.) As for the magic wood, they couldn’t possibly use a real forest, they needed room to maneuver people and cameras. Seemingly, they remembered the magic wood that Max Reinhardt had constructed for his 1937 Hollywood *Dream*, and they tried for an equivalent studio job—ponds and lakes and towering trees. Then they apparently remembered Peter Brook’s 1971 theater production and gave Titania a suspended leafy bed.

Next, the costumes. Modern clothes would jar the mood, yet doublet and hose and hoop skirts and perukes would distance the action from the audience. Perhaps someone remembered A. J. Antoon’s fine production of *Much Ado About Nothing* in Central Park in 1972 (preserved on tape), which was costumed in clothes of 1900. The turn of the century was far enough back to support romance, yet close enough so that the suits and dresses looked something like our clothes, would feel “comfortable” to us. Then there were all those cute 1900 props you could bring in—big gramophone horns, bicycles. The fleeing lovers on bicycles in the woods!—oh, the possible gimmicks to divert the audience’s impatience with verse. Hoffman kept grabbing at diversions, with a shrug for overall directorial design.

About his adaptation of the play, we can only sigh at the necessities. Of course many of the long speeches were condensed (some of them are usually condensed in the theater), and of course anyone who knows the play will wonder why one passage was retained and another shrunk or omitted, why some matters were added. (Chief curiosity: Nick Bottom was given a shrewish wife, whose few lines are in Italian.) But the adaptation, though a thing of shreds and patches, could have been made to work—shorn of the desperate gimmickry.

And with a different cast. Two of the actors are pleasingly secure. Rupert Everett, as Oberon, gives the fairy king otherworldly ease. Dominic West gives the lovelorn Lysander clarity and verve. Then comes a string of mediocrities. Michelle Pfeiffer, as Titania, makes the fairy queen sound like Beverly Hills in space: she is not unintelligent, but her speech is out of key. Calista Flockhart, as Helena, and Anna Friel, as her unintended rival in love, Hermia, both strive hard, and so does Christian Bale, the Demetrius, but all three give the impression that they are wrestling with Shakespeare rather than fulfilling their roles. If the director wanted a wry Puck whose arteries are beginning to harden (though why fairies should age is not explained), then Stanley Tucci was the right man. Two of the cast are disasters. David Strathairn, supposedly the mighty Theseus, looks and sounds like a bond salesman who has strayed in from a costume party. Sophie

Marceau, very pretty, cannot speak English well enough to handle even the few lines that are left to Hippolyta.

But the prime catastrophe is the man who is probably the best actor in the cast. What in the name of heaven (or Avon) is Kevin Kline doing in the role of Nick Bottom? Kline is one of the most clever, keen, technically polished comedians currently on the screen or stage—therefore an actor thoroughly capable of moving us to tears as well as laughs—but what is he doing as one of the “rude mechanicals,” the proles who have banded together to put on a play? Possibly Hoffman thought it would be good to have an attractive figure of a man as Titania’s dream lover, even with an ass’s head, but when Bottom, the alleged weaver, joins the tinker and tailor and bellows-mender in rehearsal, he looks like a slick director who has been hired to stage a labor-union show. Kline has no trace of the boisterous, big-hearted, stage-struck amateur. “Bottom is Shakespeare’s Everyman,” says Harold Bloom, who sees him as a predecessor of Falstaff. Kevin Kline? No Shakespearean way. (A puzzle: Bottom appears for his first scene in a spiffy three-piece suit. Two pranksters pour bottles of wine on him from above, and he accepts the act as a small annoyance. This man?)

Lastly, the music. Another odd mixture. Mendelssohn at the start, naturally, and later, too. But along the way we get the *brindisi* from *La Traviata* for no relevant reason, and even more oddly we get—twice, in amorous scenes—“Casta diva” from *Norma*. Since the first words of the aria mean “chaste goddess” and chastity is not the mood of the moment, are we hovering on the edge of a recondite joke?

There’s a recently published, very valuable stage history of the *Dream* called *Our Moonlight Revels*. The author, Gary Jay Williams of Catholic University, says on the first page: “My primary interest throughout this performance history has been to understand each major production in its cultural moment.” (For instance, he says of Peter Brook’s production, which arrived just at the end of the swinging ’60s, that its “appeal lay largely in its celebration of its own youthful, aggressive contemporary engagement with Shakespeare and the possibility of *communitas*, which it promised in its curtain-call lovefest.”) Trying to apply the Williams criterion to this film, I can discern only a blend of ambition and fear. Hoffman and the producers self-evidently responded to the play’s enchantment, but they also self-evidently didn’t quite know for whom they were making the picture, didn’t sense a “cultural moment”; so, in a sort of aesthetic trepidation, they put in everything they could think of—Bottom’s wife, the bicycles, etc. The result is a film that, unlike Brook’s production, is constantly searching for its audience.

The worst thing about the picture is that it takes the idea of Shakespeare on film back to where it was before Branagh.

Dept. of Lacuna Repair. I see that I stated the title incorrectly in my review of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The correct title is *William Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a sophisticated young man sits on a park bench on the other end of which a young woman is reading a book. He asks her what she’s reading, and she replies intently, “Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*.” “Oh,” he replies amiably, “THAT *Anna Karenina*.”

Tea with Mussolini

Franco Zeffirelli

7 June 1999

Italy has long figured in the English imagination, especially for writers. More of Shakespeare's plays take place in Italy than in any country except England. But possibly it was the Brownings, Robert and Elizabeth, who set the still-prevailing affinity. When Elizabeth died in Florence in 1861, the municipality placed a tablet on her house with some lines by an Italian poet: "Here wrote and died Elizabeth Barrett Browning . . . who made of her verse a golden ring linking Italy and England." Since that day a steady line of English residents in Florence has kept that ring polished.

It is at Elizabeth's grave that *Tea with Mussolini* begins. In June of 1935 a group of middle-aged English ladies, along with one American, all of whom live in Florence, have gathered there to commemorate the poet's death in somewhat lofty manner. Prominent in the group are a British ambassador's widow, Lady Hester (Maggie Smith); Arabella, a painter of sorts (Judi Dench); Mary, a secretary of sorts (Joan Plowright); and Georgie, a Yank archeologist in, naturally, down-to-earth clothes (Lily Tomlin). The sight of these faces brings an immediate smile of welcome to our spirits. This isn't any conventional all-star mob: this is a constellation. (Locally, the group is called *I Scorpioni*: the scorpions. Hard to see why: only one of them, Hester, is acidulous.) A few days later the group is joined, much to the annoyance of Lady Hester, by a generous, money-dripping American-Jewish woman, Elsa (Cher), a former Broadway musical star who collects paintings and wealthy, moribund husbands. All the costumes, by Jenny Beavan, are a treat, but Elsa's clothes are vulgarity raised to wit.

The screenplay by the English playwright John Mortimer and the Italian designer-director Franco Zeffirelli is drawn from Zeffirelli's memoirs, we are told. (He was born in Florence in 1923.) Luca, the boy in the film—about eight at the start—was sired out of wedlock by Mary's employer. A crisis arises in the father's life, and he asks Mary to help. She finds herself, not too much against her will, as the guardian of Luca, whom she takes into her home and teaches English. Thus Luca's life is interwoven with the lives of the several English and two American women.

Fascism is, in two senses, the order of the day, an order that is admired by Lady Hester, accepted shruggingly by most of the ladies, and viewed sardonically by Georgie, one of those sharp characters more common in films than in life who immediately see the truth about everything. When some zealous blackshirts get unruly and break windows, Lady Hester hies herself to Rome to complain and, because of her late husband, is given an audience with "Il Duce." He lays on his unguent of oil and sex appeal and permits her to pour the tea that is wheeled in. Back she goes to Florence, well unguented.

But the atmosphere changes with the arrival, in Italian policy, of Hitler. Luca's father, who had wanted his son to become an English gentleman, now wants him to become a German businessman; he takes Luca out of Mary's care and sends him to Austria.

When war with Britain begins, the English ladies are arrested and hustled into a bleak barracks. However, they are soon moved into a San Gimignano hotel, an improvement that is secretly financed by Elsa, who, as an American, is not yet an enemy alien. (Hester, still sniffy about Elsa, thinks that Il Duce has arranged for the hotel.) But enemy status eventually arrives for Elsa, too, and, of course, Georgie.

Luca returns from Austria to Florence, now a handsome youth, and after joining the partisans is able to help Elsa, who, as a Jew, is in special danger. Then danger increases for all, and the necessary climax arrives with cinematic punctuality. It stretches credibility to see the ladies thwart German destruction of San Gimignano treasures; still, it made me recall walking across the Ponte Vecchio in 1956 behind some German tourists who sighed “*Wunderbar*” as they strolled, while I remembered how close that bridge had come to being destroyed by their countrymen a dozen years before.

By focusing on these ladies, their crotchets and quarrels and adorations, plus their involvement with a growing boy, *Tea with Mussolini* announces early on that it is not going to be another *Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, a film in which gentility in Italy is slowly pulverized by political reality. Zeffirelli’s picture from its start is a character comedy-drama, more theatrical than ruthless. Though it is set in a volatile time—in an achingly beautiful place—it uses only enough of political reality to pigment its texture and climax.

Its rich movie-ness is heightened by the talents involved. John Mortimer knows how to shape scenes with dialogue, much as painters know how to turn shapes with color. Zeffirelli, in his long career as designer and director of opera, theater, and film, has not been noted for restraint; yet here his directing is generally taciturn and implicative—for instance, the scene in the orphanage where Mary decides to keep Luca instead of leaving him there. Even some sequences with Arabella’s dog reflect not cliché but real English dottiness about dogs. The cinematographer David Watkin, the same Watkin who shot *Help!* and *Catch-22* and *Chariots of Fire* and *Out of Africa* and *Night Falls on Manhattan* and I had better stop, blesses us once again visually. The editor was Tariq Anwar, who did, to name only one, *The Madness of King George*, and who helps to temper the sentiment of this film by working for terseness and elision.

Now let’s all rise, please, for the cast. First, Cher. She has already proved that she is not just a singer who is trying her hand at acting. She has genuine talent; and she plumbs all that needs to be found in every moment. Lily Tomlin is a bit glib in the you-can’t-kid-me role, and her character’s sexual preference is rather pointedly included, but she barrels us along with her. I am not going to praise Dame Maggie Smith or Dame Judi Dench; Newcastle has enough coal. But I insist on bowing to Joan Plowright, she of the brown velvet eyes. On and on she has come in the thirty-nine years since the sturdy daughter in *The Entertainer*, and now she has the quiet confidence of an artist who knows how to balance an actor’s self with a character’s truth. Anyone in the audience can see—and every student of acting *should* see—subtlety in the way Plowright answers Luca’s father when he asks her to take the boy. The answer is merely “Yes,” but the pause before it is a biography and a judgment—in a few seconds. (When we get to her apart-

ment and see the photographs of the father and the fiancé she lost in the Great War, we remember that pause.)

A sweetly simple Italian song of the day opens and closes the film. It's a perfect choice: it fixes the partial Italy that these ladies live in, an Italy to which, in their slightly nutty way, they are striving to be loyal.

Star Wars, Episode 1: The Phantom Menace

George Lucas

14 June 1999

A recent science-fiction film stirred remembrance. So, if I may. . . .

In the decade I spent as an editor in book publishing—the 1950s—three of those years included considerable work on science fiction. The authors I dealt with were, among others, Ray Bradbury, Frederik Pohl, C. M. Kornbluth, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke, hardly a grungy bunch of hacks. What impressed me most about them was that they looked on science fiction not as a commercial genre but as a way to liberate the imagination. The scientific quotient (insofar as I could understand it, anyway) varied from author to author, but the pleasure in free-flying imagination was common to all the good ones. They took their writing as seriously as any writer ever did, thought of sci-fi as a territory whose borders were wide but whose discipline was stringent, and cherished the license and energy it gave to imaginings about the near or distant future. I came in time to agree with Kingsley Amis, who said in *New Maps of Hell*, his book about the field:

One is grateful that we have a form of writing . . . which is set on tackling those large, general, speculative questions that ordinary fiction so often avoids.

In science fiction in those days, one picture was certainly not worth a thousand words, if those words came from authors like the ones above and if the sci-fi film came from a Hollywood mill. Those books were written for people who could really read, while most of the films were stitched together for kids. Even the films made from the work of such writers as Bradbury and Clarke—*Fahrenheit 451* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*—were not up to the level of their writing. In the course of time, a longer time than it now feels like, George Lucas arrived with his short film *THX 1138*, which promised films of a quality equivalent to the best science fiction. Then came the feature-length *THX 1138*, which broke that promise. The visual aspects were gratifying, the screenplay was not. Then came *Star Wars*.

This Lucas film, too, was badly unbalanced. All the creative effort had gone into the visual creations, stunning in themselves, which had then been lavished on a screenplay that seemed to have been dug out of a closet and dusted off. From my review:

The opening title tells us that the story took place in a galaxy far away ‘a long time ago.’ It really takes place in the science-fiction future, a place which is as fixed and fictitious for bad sci-fi writers as the Old West is for bad Western writers.

Then came two more *Star Wars* features, which were no improvement; and now there’s the fourth.

Star Wars, Episode 1: The Phantom Menace is a prelude to the three films that have already been made, the first of three promised preludes to fill a gap that has apparently tormented millions. As it whizzes through space, it settles the ancestry of Luke Skywalker (and of Darth Vader), but I can’t convey the essence of the plot because I wasn’t clear about it even as it was happening. (Also I was bemused by the dialogue, which fluctuates between the archaic and the snappy.) I’m not even positive who the Phantom Menace is—possibly the man with the war-paint face who duels with the two protagonists at the end—or why he is more of a phantom or a menace than others of their enemies. That final duel, not incidentally, crystallizes the whole film. It is set on the edge of a bottomless pit, into which one of the combatants is of course bound to fall. (Guess who.) That screamingly trite—and one-sided—battle is the climax toward which this 133-minute, \$100-million-plus film has been moving.

Some of the visuals momentarily relieve the tedium, particularly the faces of a few characters, faces as large as bushel baskets, which are made to move with remarkable delicacy of expression. Other than that, I was mostly aware that the two protagonists—a Jedi knight and his apprentice—were meant to suggest a medieval knight and squire with obligations of honor, courage, and prowess. This hieratic sense is underscored by the appearance of the knight, played by Liam Neeson, whose beard and long hair and tunic suggest a nineteenth-century lithograph of Jesus. (Neeson, a fine actor, seems somnolent much of the time, while his junior, Ewan McGregor, tries to pump away vitally.) The implication is that those medieval qualities, which have become so sullied in our world, will be found again out there in space.

This latest *Star Wars* has the same basic effect as the other three: the sense that it was made not only for children but for the belief in many adults that they are still kids at heart. The future isn’t being technologized here so much as juvenilized, trundled back to a time of innocence before we were loaded with adult problems, before we were (it is implied) tainted with sex. Thus there is a fake simplicity about this film, as with its predecessors, that is slightly sickening.

In New York, the ticket-buyers’ line outside the Ziegfeld Theater began to form early on May 1 for the opening of *The Phantom Menace* on May 19. About 250 people had organized themselves, through a website, to alternate shifts of four hours apiece. Many other theaters had similar lines.

I put aside all attempts at large-scale observation, all sighs about deterioration of standards through the *Star Wars* mania. I will allow myself only a single sigh: I still haven’t seen a sci-fi film as good as the best science fiction that I’ve read.

Besieged

Bernardo Bertolucci

21 June 1999

Tough times for Bernardo Bertolucci. When he began making films, in the early 1960s, he was one of the young surfers riding the Italian postwar tide, which had been generated by such older figures as Rossellini and De Sica. Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution*, his second film but his first to be seen here, had the paradoxical design that marked the work of Olmi and Pasolini, the sense of breaking free of convention at the same time that the film followed a careful plan. Bertolucci clearly owed much to older masters, but *Before the Revolution* sustained, movingly, the contradictory blend of angry despair and smoldering aspiration that was a signet of the time. To tag Bertolucci a Marxist in those days was almost superfluous. Even if his Marxism was only *à la mode*, not much more than noblesse oblige for young Italian artist-intellectuals of the day, it stamped him as someone who had matured just after World War II and the end of fascism.

Politics certainly didn't disappear from the Bertolucci work that soon followed, *The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist* and others, but a preening aestheticism had slithered in, had immersed his films in a too-exquisite *Vogue* chic. Then, as the preciousity diminished a bit, we got the gaudily lauded *Last Tango in Paris*, which will be valuable as long as acting is valued because, whatever else may be arguable about it, it contains Brando's performance. A few more truly Italian pictures followed, not consistently gratifying, and then the steam seemed to wheeze out of Bertolucci. He found "renewal" where so many debilitated Westerners have found it, in exotica, in Asia and Africa—*The Last Emperor*, *Little Buddha*, *The Sheltering Sky*. But even those pictures were preferable to his return to Italy and a confection called *Stealing Beauty*, a film shorn of the connections with his country that had given even his lesser work an aortic pulse.

And now it's worse. *Besieged*, which is set mostly in Rome, smells of desperation, a near-frantic bankruptcy. We're told that Bertolucci's wife, Clare Peploe, had for years been keen about a short story by James Lasdun, that at last the chance came for her and her husband to adapt it for the screen and for him to direct it. It seems to me just possible that Lasdun's story had been stored away as emergency rations and that, when everything else had gone, they broke it out. It's a story of only flashy import, and it's not even very interesting as narrative.

In an unnamed African country, the police arrest a schoolteacher who dissents from the dictator. As he is taken away, his wife, Shandhurai, is very frightened: we know because urine trickles down her leg. She is next seen in Rome, where she is working as a maid for a composer-pianist named Kinsky while she studies to become a nurse. Kinsky falls in love with her and proposes marriage, but she is fiercely loyal to her husband (about whom Kinsky had not known). When the husband is liberated and arrives in Rome, however, she doesn't even meet him: she suddenly, precipitously, accepts Kinsky.

The emotional muzziness, the lack of character conviction would be weak enough even if the film were well constructed, but it isn't. It is stripped of connective tissue—for

instance, there is no explanation of how Shandhurai got to Rome and became a nursing student, and there is no hint of love growing in her between her rejection of Kinsky and her acceptance of him. Inevitably, some Bertolucci loyalists are telling us that these matters show admirable astringency, an impatience with conventional data; but to me the film looks scrappy, as if he had not shot enough footage to edit it properly.

The picture's only asset is Thandie Newton, who was Sally Hemings in *Jefferson in Paris* and is again quietly lovely. The English actor David Thewlis, who once was Smike in the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Nicholas Nickleby* and who has been in three Mike Leigh films, plays Kinsky—without much help from the screenplay.

I have not been a consistently warm admirer of Bertolucci through the years, but at his worst, it was always possible to see vestiges of grand ambition in him. The vacuity and the skimpiness of *Besieged* are shocking.

Eternity and a Day

Theo Angelopoulos

28 June 1999

The Greek filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos, now sixty-six, has had a rough road in this country. His reputation outside the United States is very high, but because his style is somewhat abstruse and his films lengthy, his work has not been widely shown here. Now another hazard threatens. His latest film, which won the Palme d'Or at last year's Cannes festival, is getting American theatrical release, and his difficulties here are unlikely to diminish. I've seen four of his ten previous features, and this latest work seems to crystallize his stylistic difficulties without providing as much reward as some of the others.

Eternity and a Day, at 132 minutes, is not the longest Angelopoulos film, but it is in the same *adagio* tempo as longer ones. This pace is so ruminative that we soon recognize it as a daring choice, not a slurring. He has always seen the camera as a dweller in the scene, affording us the chance to savor, rather than to transport us through adventure. The frequent comparison in this matter is of course with Antonioni, a comparison especially urged now because Angelopoulos's script collaborator was Tonino Guerra, who has often worked with Antonioni. But for me there is a clear difference between the two directors. In Antonioni, the intent of the *adagio* rhythm is to enlist time—the very passage of time—as a force in this enterprise, time as the alchemy that affects the psyches, the very chromosomes, of the people involved. With Angelopoulos, when the pace of a scene is slow, as it often is, I feel that he is encouraging us to invite parenthetical or footnoting thoughts about the scene—adjuncts that will enrich the material.

The film is shot in color, yet Angelopoulos brings in the color gradually by shooting the first sequences in shades of gray and white. After other colors enter, we realize that gray and white are the colors of the opening minutes. The place is northern Greece, in

and around Thessaloniki, in the large seaside villa of a distinguished middle-aged poet named Alexandre. He is in the process of saying goodbye to his family, possibly a last goodbye, before he goes into hospital the next day. His affliction isn't named, but the references to the spread of a growth and his frequent need to take painkillers leave no doubt. As Alexandre moves from one person to another, as he visits his married daughter to leave his dog with her, he returns, again and again, to the past. (Usually, like the old man in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, he himself remains as he is now even when he's in a scene of long ago.)

The pathos of this farewell—the heightening by disease of one's constant awareness of mortality—is the only subject of the early sections. Then, when driving along in the town, Alexandre sees a bunch of boys, ten or twelve years old, being chased by men. Spontaneously, he invites one of the boys into his car and gives him a lift to safety. We don't know who the boy is or why he is being chased. (This is a recurrent Angelopoulos device. He posits mystery, as life does, to be clarified later.) Eventually we learn that the boys are illegal Albanian immigrants who are being caught to be sold secretly for adoption. At least, we assume it's for adoption.

Because of compassion, which awakens in him without any appeal by the boy himself, Alexandre takes charge of the boy, hoping to get him back across the Albanian border, two hours away. (This picture was made two years ago, so the topicality is accidental.) Alexandre's care of the boy, who sometimes is troublesome, is interwoven with his own problems; still, his concern for the boy brings the doomed man a renewed interest in life. At the end, the boy is well-bestowed, and Alexandre, though his physical condition is of course unchanged, has altered his immediate plans.

For the first third of *Eternity and a Day*, we are held by its gravity, not just by the fact of terminal illness, which is a familiar film device. This gravity is quickly realized through the performance of Alexandre by Bruno Ganz, the German actor for whom pensive and melancholy depths are *Heimat*. (Ganz spoke German in the film and is dubbed in Greek, which viewers who know neither German nor Greek would not know. In any case, Angelopoulos rarely shoots Ganz in close-up when speaking, and he often has him speak with his back to the camera.) The renewal of vitality in the poet, through the irruption of the boy into his life, is also a familiar trope, but this director and this actor make it true, not treacly.

Then, alas, as the film winds on, it becomes obtrusively poetic. What had been a realistic work, lyric but realistic, slides into ostentatious symbolism. The first sign of it is at the Albanian border, to which Alexandre has driven the boy. (But he doesn't leave the boy there.) It is winter. On the other side of the high wire fence, in a snowy field and misty light, are a number of men in fixed attitudes—frozen, we might think, until one of them moves. As this tableau appears, we can feel the film slip from direct, “felt” art into artiness. Ambiguous, too. What do these posed men signify? This arty vein persists; it's at its worst during a bus ride that the old man and the boy take later. At various times on this trip their fellow passengers are: a young man who comes aboard, as a crowd roars behind him, carrying a huge red flag (and who soon falls asleep—presumably thus

showing us how much we can depend on youthful revolutionaries); a poet in nineteenth-century dress whom we have glimpsed earlier and who exemplifies lost purity; and three musicians who play eighteenth-century music, symbolizing a lost perfection. The bus becomes a sort of medieval pageant wagon, bearing us to various spiritual states.

A less blatant factor, but equally unfortunate, is that the last half-hour is a lengthy series of conclusions. Four or five times in those thirty minutes we feel that this must be the closing shot, and it isn't. Alexandre moves on—to new versions of material that has already been addressed.

I wish that Angelopoulos's last film, *Ulysses' Gaze* (with Harvey Keitel), which was longer and seemed shorter, had been the one to breach American ignorance about him. But *Eternity and a Day*, with its Cannes prize, seemed to distributors the work with which to begin his American career. I hope it helps: he is an artist of power and integrity. But I confess that I remembered here what the English film critic Philip French wrote about an earlier Angelopoulos picture: "Seeing any ten minutes from this handsome movie's two-and-a-half-hour duration, you would think they came from a masterpiece." Then French, like me in this case, added his disappointment with the whole.

An Ideal Husband

Oliver Parker

19–26 July 1999

In the January 12, 1895, issue of the *Saturday Review* of London, the magazine's theater critic reviewed two new plays. The first was by Henry James, the second by Oscar Wilde. The critic was Bernard Shaw.

Gasping for breath, I go on to note that the Wilde play has now been filmed. Again. It was done in 1947, directed by Alexander Korda; this time *An Ideal Husband* was directed by Oliver Parker. Parker's only previous feature was the Laurence Fishburne *Othello*, a picture doomed before it began, as most Shakespeare films are. The Wilde film had a chance, and by and large Parker has won out.

Parker made his own screen adaptation and—again by and large—kept the twists of the original plot, and of course kept a great many of the epigrams that help to camouflage the arrant plottiness. In Shaw's review, he noted that other London critics complained that

such epigrams can be turned out by the score by anyone lightminded enough to descend to such frivolity. As far as I can see, I am the only person in London who cannot write an Oscar Wilde play at will.

Samples of Wilde's sparkle: Lord Goring, the boutonniere bachelor who is generally held to be Wilde's dream projection of himself and therefore has most of the wit, is reproved by his crusty father for wasting his time in society. The father says that London society

consists of “a lot of damned nobodies talking about nothing.” Goring replies: “I love talking about nothing, Father. It is the only thing I know anything about.” Other characters have unwitting wit. At a later point Goring’s father says to him, “Damme, sir, it’s your duty to get married. You can’t be always living for pleasure.”

The *beau monde* is the world of the play, a world through which Wilde gamboled with ease. When he wrote this play, it was still more usual than not for the British theater to deal with the upper crust, except for melodrama and low comedy. For the upper classes, this locus was flattering; for others, it was escape. Today, in this country, where class generally means wealth and not much else, it will be interesting to see what appeal this film has.

Parker and his producers have given the picture almost every kind of aid. His adaptation has slimmed down the plot, which helps it in most ways. (A plot strand about a diamond brooch is completely eliminated.) The base is that favorite device of the period, an action in the past that comes back to haunt the present. The mighty Ibsen used it in *A Doll House*, the workaday Pinero in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*. Wilde uses it here in the form of blackmail.

Sir Robert Chiltern, a rapidly rising member of Parliament, once sold a state secret in order to get the capital to begin his now-shining political career. Mrs. Cheveley, an attractive “adventuress,” arrives in London from Vienna, where she has been making hay, bearing with her Sir Robert’s youthful letter confirming his guilt about that secret. She will give the letter to the press unless he reverses a stand he has taken in the House of Commons on a certain matter: his reversal will benefit her financially. Chiltern’s problem is compounded because his wife, who knows nothing of that past matter, adores him as a paragon of virtue.

Parker has helped the story by opening it up into varied locations. For instance, a couple of scenes take place in Rotten Row in Hyde Park, with some characters mounted and others in carriages. Also he inserts a visit by some of the people to the first night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (Thus, in a neat three-cushion-billiards carom, Wilde comes out for a curtain speech after that play in a film made from another play of his.) Parker has had to maneuver the closing plot mechanics as busily as Wilde did to make things come out right—and to reconcile the adoring Lady Chiltern with her imperfect husband, whose career will now sail on. From Shaw’s review:

The modern note is struck in Sir Robert Chiltern’s assertion of the individuality and courage of his wrongdoing as against the mechanical idealism of his stupidly good wife, and in his bitter criticism of a love that is only the reward of merit.

(This from the man who had already written *Widowers’ Houses*, *The Philanderer*, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, and *Arms and the Man*.)

Parker directs skillfully, deploying both wit and drama. The film opens with Lord Goring’s servant, facing us, impassively opening the curtain in his master’s bedroom to let in the morning light, as in the background we dimly see a naked woman slip out of

his lordship's bed and into the bathroom. The scene in which Mrs. Cheveley first confronts Sir Robert with her threat is robust old-fashioned theater, without the *jambon*.

Costume design is always more noticeable in period pictures and, in some ways, more easy to excel in. But nothing can stop us from admiring the clothes here, especially the women's clothes, especially the hats, designed by Caroline Harris, who did Parker's *Othello* and the recent Victorian *The Governess*. And those clothes look especially resplendent in the camera of David Johnson, who shot that *Othello* and who makes us feel that all the night scenes were shot by lamplight.

Then—a big then—there's the cast. Whatever the plot's arthritis, the actors make us glad that the film was done. Begin with the first face we see, Goring's servant, played by Peter Vaughan, who was Anthony Hopkins' father in *The Remains of the Day* and who sets the class stratification of this world before a word is spoken. Goring is Rupert Everett, who quite evidently enjoys the part immensely but who (unlike the man who played the role on Broadway a few years ago) restrains his pleasure so that we can enjoy it too. Excellent, airily precise acting. Chiltern is Jeremy Northam, recently the polished barrister in *The Winslow Boy*. Here he is asked for deeper feelings and very nearly finds them. His wife is Cate Blanchett, who moved adequately through *Elizabeth* and struggled through *Pushing Tin*. Here she has considerable wistful charm, a turn-of-the-century woman created by her ideals but more victimized than supported by them. Minnie Driver, as Sir Robert's maiden sister, acts well enough but is miscast. She is simply not the fetching ingénue that the part requires. John Wood, stout oak, is Lord Caversham, Goring's harrumphing father, and makes us wish the part were bigger.

Mrs. Cheveley is played by Julianne Moore. It's higher than high time that particular attention be paid to Moore. We hear, justly, that careers of range and depth are difficult in American films, but occasionally some people manage them. Meryl Streep is a fine instance. Moore is in one way even more adventurous: she takes minor roles when she likes them, like Glenn Close's dim sister in *Cookie's Fortune*. In major roles, she played—unforgettably—Yelena in *Vanya on 42nd Street* and, among others, a sophisticated neurotic in *Safe*, a conventional movie heroine in *The Lost World*, and a regal porno star in *Boogie Nights*. In *An Ideal Husband*, the only American in an English cast, she gives her Victorian femme fatale all the burnish of her social position at the same time that, with steel under the silk, she lets us see how hard-won that position has been, what she has had to undergo as a woman in order to make her way; and she conveys it all with stature and grace.

Onward, Moore!

Autumn Tale

Eric Rohmer

2 August 1999

These days a new film by Eric Rohmer brings with it the fragrance of nostalgia, of film history. Rohmer is one of the few surviving active directors of the French New Wave that so invigorated the film world in the 1950s and 1960s. Born in the early 1920s (he is shiftily about the precise date), he is ten years older than most of the others in that group. Not only is he still active, but his latest work ranks high in his long list of pictures.

Autumn Tale reasserts with splendid flourish Rohmer's cardinal principle of art: design. What a headache or nuisance—or, possibly, amusement—he must be to the priests of postmodernism, particularly in France. Postmodernism rests a good deal of its case on its enmity to narrative design, assailing its “credibility,” trumpeting that design is the fruit of intellectual and artistic detritus from the past. No, replies Rohmer quietly, humorously, even poignantly, design is an independent truth.

This is not, at least not visibly, because he is a Catholic. More patently, his films revel in intricacy of design less as belief than as pronouncement of power. The very power to conceive design, Rohmer implies, is a chief clarity in the chaos of existence. In the midst of that chaos, which all artists recognize and in which postmodernists exult, some artists can at least imagine an alternative. Credibility is not the only criterion: possibility is another. To Rohmer, it is not the probability of his design that he promotes as much as a conviction that the power to conceive intelligent design helps to beat back the dark. This belief applies even in the small-scale story of his new film.

Rohmer likes to work in clusters. (Another warrant of design.) He has made some “single” pictures—*Perceval* and the exquisite *Marquise of O*—but his first six features were grouped as *Six Moral Tales*, and now he finishes another group, *Tales of the Four Seasons*. With this new film, we are immediately aware that once again Rohmer has enlisted landscape as contributor—not as calendar art but as testimony to dailiness. A few years ago I was being taken in a taxi through Dingle by an Irish driver, and I asked her how it felt to spend day after day amidst all this beauty. She said, “I pay it no mind.” She wasn't dull-witted; she lived there. So do Rohmer's characters—in the valley of the Rhone. (Only once we hear some mention of the countryside, a complaint about power lines.)

The autumnal title has a double meaning: it is harvest time in the Rhone vineyard country, and the four principal characters are at an age when the reality of winter comes into view. Isabelle has a bookshop in Montelimar and lives in the country nearby (with a husband who is irrelevant to the story). Magali, her friend, is a widow who runs a vineyard in the vicinity, Etienne is a professor of philosophy at a local university, and Gerald is a local businessman. Both women have grown children who are pointedly included in the goings-on but are not pivotal.

Magali is very much interested in remarrying, but she lives in the country and meets no one who is possible. Isabelle, who loves her friend, puts a personal ad in the

local paper, seeking a suitable man. Gerald, a widower, answers the ad; he meets Isabelle, who doesn't immediately reveal that she is only scouting for a friend. Complications and resolution of the design are best left to the film.

Beatrice Romand, whose first Rohmer appearance was in *Claire's Knee* (1970) and who has since been in four more Rohmer pictures, makes Magali proud and moody, with spurts of hot feeling. Marie Rivière, who has appeared for Rohmer three previous times, gives Isabelle a frisky dignity. Didier Sandre, the Etienne, and Alain Libolt, the Gerald, are highly experienced theater actors who endow their roles with resource.

These excellent people fulfill one of the subtlest elements in the Rohmer design: they converse beautifully. My French is pathetic, but with the subtitles I—or anyone—can savor Rohmer's language and can sense that he is insisting, as so many French dramatists have done, on articulated thought and the swirl of the completed sentence as part of the purpose of existence. The flavors of the language, woven with the choreography of the story, make *Autumn Tale* pure pleasure.

My Son the Fanatic

Udayan Prasad

9 August 1999

Belatedly, a welcome to *My Son the Fanatic*. It was written by Hanif Kureishi, author of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, and was directed by Udayan Prasad, Indian-born but raised in England, whose second feature it is. I've not seen his first, *Brothers in Trouble*, but Om Puri, who was in it, plays the leading role in the new picture.

Here Puri is Parvez, Pakistani-born, who has spent twenty-five years as a taxi driver in the northern English city of Bradford. The story opens with a party to toast the engagement of Parvez's son Farid and the daughter of a very English police inspector. Parvez is delighted; the inspector is not. The engagement doesn't last, and Farid makes his way, mostly offscreen, from this attempt at assimilation to fierce Islamic fundamentalism. This journey takes place so consistently offscreen that the film's title is a misnomer. Farid does become a fanatic, in his father's eyes, but it is a secondary matter: his father is the protagonist of the story.

An important part of Parvez's business is hooker transport. He carries hookers to and from their dates, he makes hooker recommendations to visiting businessmen, and, apparently like other drivers, considers all this to be simply part of his job. He becomes friendly with the women, especially with Bettina (played by Rachel Griffiths, the Hilary of *Hilary and Jackie*). She gets to know something of Parvez's open spirit and concern for his son. In time she falls in love with Parvez, as he does with her. Their affair becomes more than another fictional sob about a hooker's one true love because of the generosity in both performances. Underlying their happiness in each other is fear—about the

future—plus the sense that each has earned this love and must have it while it is possible. The affair becomes known to both Parvez's wife and his son, and of course affects them. The story ends with determination more than resolution.

The film plumbs some depths in societal relations (including a few sharp anti-Jewish cracks by Pakistanis), but it centers on Parvez, on interior turbulence in him. A quarter century ago he uprooted himself for the sake of his family, and now more uprootings loom. Puri, highly esteemed in Indian film and theater, has immediate unforced power, warmth, and the gift of evoking sympathy without asking for it. Bettina's response to Parvez is thus all the more understandable—and dangerous. Griffiths gives us both the heat and the despair. Also present is Stellan Skarsgård, the Swedish actor who has rocketed into English-language films (*Breaking the Waves*, *Good Will Hunting*, etc.). Here he is a German business visitor, but, whatever he is, continues to mystify me. How does a director distinguish between Skarsgård and the grips and electricians on the set?

The Gambler

Károly Makk

23 August 1999

She says that she got out her notebook and that he

began pacing about the room in swift strides, diagonally from the door to the stove and back. Every time he reached the stove he would invariably knock against it twice. On top of this he smoked one cigarette after another, throwing his unsmoked stubs frequently into the ashtray at the corner of his desk. After he had dictated for some time he asked me to read back what I had written down.

The date was October 4, 1866, the place St. Petersburg, the dictator was Dostoevsky, and this was his first meeting with Anna Snitkina, who became his secretary on that day, his wife four months later, and who wrote reminiscences of him that are among the most precious insights we have into the life of a giant in art.

Virtually begging for fusion, at least for apposition of some kind, were Anna's account of her first month with Dostoevsky and the very novel that he was dictating. That fusion has now occurred in *The Gambler*, through a screenplay by Katharine Ogden and Charles Cohen and Nick Dear. Dostoevsky, under severe contractual obligations, had to deliver a new novel to his publisher in twenty-seven days. That novel, itself called *The Gambler*, derived from his passion for gambling, which had developed a few years before at Baden-Baden, and from his alliance there with a young woman. The gambling of fortunes in the novel posed against the gambling of his whole publishing future by writing under great duress, the contrast of re-creating erotic fever while he was being charmed by the quiet appeal of his secretary—these elements have long been there,

waiting to be used. But unfortunately the three screenwriters who used them have done too little and too much.

The relationship between the real lives—the author and his assistant—and the fictional lives they are working on is not made sufficiently ironical or pathetic. The similarity and the contrast are not lucidly juxtaposed. On the other hand, the character of Dostoevsky is freighted with mad-genius clichés, transforming him into someone like John Barrymore in *Svengali*. The epileptic seizures are sadly true, but a lot of the role is written like a Dostoevsky parody.

Michael Gambon, an overwhelmingly resourceful actor, fights to put life into this stock figure, but the more he succeeds, the less like the real Dostoevsky is the role. Jodhi May, who was so dreamily strong in that overlooked gem *Sister My Sister*, gives Anna appealing gravity. Polly Walker, an intelligent actress, is almost shockingly beautiful as the two lady loves, fictional (in the novel being dictated) and real (in the author's past). John Wood, heavily wigged and bearded, pads around Baden-Baden as a foolish, besotted general. Luise Rainer, the German actress whose brief Hollywood career in the 1930s brought her two successive Oscars and then oblivion, appears briefly in the fictional sequences as an antique tyrant.

The director, alas, is Károly Makk—alas, because this Hungarian filmmaker, now in his seventies, is certainly gifted but, insofar as I have sampled his long career, has only once been fortunate in his scripts. *Love* (1970) is a treasure; the other Makk films that I have seen haven't done much more than confirm Makk's talent. Like *The Gambler*. The picture was shot in various Hungarian locales—it's in English, I should note—and Makk knows how to get the most from them and from his people in them. (I should note, too, that the Film Forum in New York has once more launched U.S. possibilities for a film we should at least have the chance to see.) But *The Gambler* is only an idea for a film, not yet clarified and embodied.

Lucie Aubrac

Claude Berri

13 September 1999

Montluc prison in Lyon, much used by the Germans during their occupation of France, now appears in a second film. The first was Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (1956), a masterpiece of such purity that it makes me catch my breath just to remember it. Now comes a film by Claude Berri, *Lucie Aubrac*, in which Montluc, during the Occupation, figures prominently, although it is not the principal setting that it was in Bresson. Berri, who surely knows Bresson's film, simply wanted to tell a true story (as did Bresson) that involves Montluc, so the repetition was unavoidable.

And unfair to Berri. Skilled though he is, reserved and truthful, he could not have been intending to rival Bresson. In fact, it increases one's respect for Berri that he was

willing to risk the comparison because he wanted to tell this story.

Lyon in 1943. The Germans, enthusiastically abetted by the French fascist police and militia, have the region in their grip. Lucie Aubrac, a non-Jew, is happily married to Raymond Aubrac, a Jew who changed his family name from Samuel. They have a small son. Both Lucie and Raymond are in the Resistance, with Raymond fairly high in the organization. At the start Raymond is the more active of the two: the film begins as he helps in the bombing of a German troop train. But after the Germans, with French police assistance, sniff him out and arrest him, the dynamics of the story shift to Lucie.

May 14th, an important date in their married life for personal reasons, will find Raymond in prison. The day before, Lucie visits the French judge in charge of the case and tells him quietly that if Raymond is not out of prison on the morning of the 14th, he (the judge) will not see the sunset on that day. She leaves. Raymond is released.

But he is soon re-arrested, trapped at a meeting of Resistance commanders to which the police have been tipped off by a traitor. Much of the action then concerns Montluc and the treatment that Raymond undergoes there as well as at German headquarters. The dynamics remain with Lucie, however, as she plans for his rescue. Using a false name, she visits various German commanders, including the now-notorious Klaus Barbie, tells them that she is unmarried (false), pregnant (true), that Raymond is the father (also true), and that she wants to be married to him even though he is going to be executed, so that her child will have a name. A German official arranges for a brief ceremony to be held in his office, which is the opportunity for Lucie and her Resistance friends to do their job.

The film ends with a signed endorsement of it by Lucie Aubrac, whose survival and approval provide an extra tingle. It also helps to explain why Berri wanted to make the picture, even though it is, in a general sense, familiar: another account of resistance under the German occupation. First, this story is factual; second, the protagonist is still with us; third, though this is certainly not unique, that protagonist is a woman.

But these factors are not what keep us absorbed throughout. The film itself holds us. Berri, who began his career as a sentimentalist, then declined even from that plane to mere manufacturer, has ascended in recent years into artistry. His two films based on Marcel Pagnol, *Jean de Florette* and its sequel *Manon of the Spring*, caught perfectly Pagnol's Zolaesque earthiness, tempered with the ache of rural ballad. Berri's actual Zola film, *Germinal*, wandered in structure but not in tone. Through that film and even through the lesser *Uranus* and *Queen Margot*, Berri has been moving toward quiet control. *Lucie Aubrac* is directed with restraint yet insistence, with a conviction that Berri felt he needed only to tell the story—clearly—without underscoring. (The first-class cinematographer and editor were Vincenzo Marano and Hervé de Luze.)

Carole Bouquet plays Lucie and surprises us. Up to now she has not been much more than a lovely woman with a trademark smile. Berri hasn't transmuted her into a top-rank actress, but he has certainly sounded whatever depths, whatever pools of heat, are in her. In the intimate scenes with Raymond, it's impossible to doubt the truth of Lucie's love. Daniel Auteuil, as Raymond, is no surprise. His performances always have

the texture of fine cloth from a master weaver—always fitting the occasion, whether the gnarled peasant in the Pagnol films or this tacitly heroic Resistance officer. Something more than a footnote about the cast: the bookseller who shares Raymond's Montluc cell for a time is played by Jean Martin, one of Beckett's favorite actors, who was the first Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* and the first Clov in *Endgame*.

West Beirut

Ziad Doueiri

27 September 1999

Films can depress us about the future of mankind—not when the films are bad but when they are good. The best foreign pictures do so much to unite us with exotic people, to show us the linkages under the differences and to render the differences comprehensible, that global harmony should be on the rise. Ozu didn't make his films as "explanations" of Japan, nor did Ray in India, nor Kiarostami in Iran, nor Zhang Yimou in China; their films are artworks, not tracts. Still, anyone who has seen their work must afterward, when reading political news from those countries, feel some sense of being trapped in great concrete channels irrelevant to the minutiae of every day. Most political news on TV and in newspapers tends to treat countries as slabs of dominant qualities; but film particularizes. Every art can do this, of course: but one of the special benefits of film is its immediate immediacy. Film, in its hundred years, could have made the globe smaller.

Still, it is hard to see that this has happened. Obviously it is a reductive sentimentality to think in terms of One World, which was a much-mouthed catchphrase in the 1950s, but film might have been a means of appreciating the many worlds. Often, after good foreign films, I have felt that possibility—and then a pang caused by stasis, complacent stasis.

The latest cause of the pang is *West Beirut*. This is a first film by Ziad Doueiri, born in Beirut in 1963, who had his professional education in the United States, worked here as a cinematographer, then went home to make this feature about his memories of growing up during the civil war in his city. His film reminds us yet again—casually, even humorously—that international tensions tend to make "other" people faceless and that film can give them faces.

The year is 1975. The city is split: East Beirut is controlled by Christians, West Beirut by Muslims. Militias fight. All that Doueiri wants to show is that two Muslim boys and a Christian girl had their adolescences in that situation. The two boys hate their (French) high school together, get into mischief together, daydream about women together, tease and quarrel like kids anywhere, except that some of the buildings around them are wrecked, barricades impede their wanderings, and the sound of guns often spackles the air; and the girl tags along as a sort of appendage that they like. The parents of Tarek, the

bigger of the two boys, are greatly worried, naturally, about the civil strife, but Tarek is enjoying the fact that his school is closed. He has some adventures that wouldn't occur in normal situations, including his stumble into a brothel patronized by both Muslims and Christians, but Doueiri, who says that the picture is largely autobiographical, emphasizes that Tarek and his friends manage to live in their own world, focused on their own interests.

Doueiri directs in a close, neorealistic, almost brusque way, with a number of hand-held shots, and though he is not remotely ambitious for the lyric, he manages at times to suggest Truffaut—the kidding around of the two boys, a sequence on bicycles, the final freeze-frame. He gets warm performances from Joseph Bou Nassar and Carmen Lebbos as Tarek's parents, and the director's younger brother, Rami, plays Tarek as an engaging scamp. Mohamad Chamas is pleasant as his pal. A press note tells us that Chamas, an orphan, has not done any acting since this film and currently lives in a shack in a refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut.

Doueiri had a different central aim, but he must have known that his film would bring Lebanon a few thousand miles closer.

American Beauty

Sam Mendes

11 October 1999

Six characters are again searching for an author—not Pirandello's people but Alan Ball's. These six are in *American Beauty*, which was written by Ball, and if they are not startlingly original or deep people, they are vivid, principally because the actors who portray them are so strong. But at the finish of the picture, we're left feeling that Ball has had a trial run with them: now he needs to go back and really use them to some enlightening and organically whole purpose.

The title (like that of the French film *Romance*) is a declaration: it blazons that this is the one thing the film is not going to be about. Ball wastes no time in keeping this promise. The film starts with an aerial view of neat suburban streets, and as the camera moves in, a man's voice tells us that his name is Lester Burnham and that this is his neighborhood. Then he says: "In less than a year I'll be dead. Of course I don't know that yet. In a way I'm dead already."

If we resist an urge to reach for our coats and leave—after this double whammy of facile metaphysics and a prediction of moribund suburban life—*American Beauty* compensates us in some ways, but it never justifies the blatancy of its opening, and it never does anything to freshen what is only one more journey through familiar fortyish unfulfillment. Lester is a journalist (living, as do so many film persons, in a home and style beyond his apparent means) who feels his existence slipping through his fingers. His wife, Carolyn, has more passion for developing her real-estate business than for the

man who lies next to her at night. Their daughter Jane, a high schooler, hates them both for the usual adolescent reason: she thinks she's a woman and they think she's a child.

Thus each is tagged, and each is ready for trouble. For Lester, it's the sexy blonde high-school chum of his daughter. For Carolyn, it's Buddy Kane, the handsome real estate honcho of the area. For Jane, it's the boy who just moved in next door. This boy, Ricky Fitts, is the one real surprise in the picture: he is the son of a Marine colonel and, in his introspective way, has found a way of dealing with his two-fisted father that leaves him free to follow his own quirks. His mother has been erased almost into catatonia by the father, but Ricky is quietly surviving.

This supposedly realistic film has more than its share of arrant mechanics. If a middle-aged journalist of some success gets fired, would he then insist on getting a job as a cook in a hamburger joint? Just to flaunt his freedom? Would Buddy Kane, a skillful smoothie, snuggle with another man's wife in a public place? Just because the plot needs the affair to be discovered? Would Lester proceed toward sex with the young blonde on the sofa in his living room—with his daughter upstairs and his wife liable to come home?

Yet these coarsely stitched seams might pass if the stories of all these people moved to some enlightenment or if some new light were shed on old subjects. But all that Ball can tell us is what many American and British and French and Italian films have already expounded. Modern urban-suburban life can be anesthetic; the human spirit often chafes against dehumanizing limits and either explodes or shrivels. Ball has nothing to add.

What's worse, he burdened his script with that zingy opening which he then had to justify. But Lester's death at the end is no kind of summation of what the film is about. It's merely a maniacal affront, irrelevant to what Lester has been through in the story. Worse still, his opening lines and the symmetrical post-mortem voice-over make Lester a spirit hovering over his mundane life, with no hint as to why this particular suburbanite has been elevated to an all-seeing view. Except, of course, that the opening and closing were thought to give the film "stature."

The actors deserve better. Lester is Kevin Spacey, who is becoming the new Gene Hackman—a man of ordinary appearance and effect, gifted in a way that makes his ordinariness an asset, an apotheosis of the contemporary. Peter Gallagher, who in contrast has exceptional good looks, struggles with that burden to make Buddy Kane comprehensible, if not appealing. Thora Birch is pathetic and irritating as Jane, and Wes Bentley finds odd mental corners in the loony boyfriend. As his father, Chris Cooper takes good care of the role. Mena Suvari is sufficiently succulent as the quasi-innocent blonde menace.

The really memorable acting comes from Annette Bening as Carolyn. Energized, deep-breathing, wonderfully precise, Bening makes Carolyn flare through the picture. Bening was trained for the theater, and the press notes tell us that she has lately played Hedda Gabler in Los Angeles; her work here makes me regret that I missed her Hedda. Her past films, especially *The American President* and *Bugsy*, showed how incisive her

acting can be. This new film suggests that she may be one of the few film women since Bette Davis to have an acting career as she ages.

The director is Sam Mendes, the Englishman who quickly made a reputation in the theater with *Cabaret* and *The Blue Room*. I saw the latter and thought that Mendes did ingeniously well by his actors; here, in his film debut, he has sensibly concentrated on his actors. Some newcomers to film directing, after theater acclaim, try to prove themselves cinematically with all sorts of fussiness—odd camera angles, intrusive montage, and so on. Mendes simply tells his story clearly. He was much assisted, I'd guess, by the veteran cinematographer, Conrad L. Hall; but Mendes's real concern was his cast, helping them to dig into themselves.

Now if Ball or someone else would only improve the script—and if they could remake the picture with the same cast . . .

Breakfast of Champions

Alan Rudolph

18 October 1999

Breakfast of Champions: The phrase was once an advertising slogan for a cereal and has since been used as a running gag—now a limping one—delivered by waiters when they serve martinis. The film itself is an instance of a rare phenomenon: it is dreadful but interesting.

Alan Rudolph, who directed, adapted the screenplay from a 1973 novel by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. and here sustains his record for bungling possibly good ideas. (His most recent bungle was *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle*.) Still, whatever his shortcomings as a filmmaker, Rudolph has one superb gift: salesmanship. Despite his artistic record, he was able, first, to sell himself yet again. Second, he sold the idea of this film. Third, he convinced two major stars, Bruce Willis and Nick Nolte, to appear in highly eccentric roles; and Rudolph also convinced a major actor, Albert Finney, to accompany them.

Imagine *American Beauty* re-conceived as an expressionist satire—with the same constrictions of personality by business life, the same hidden frenzies in happy-seeming characters, and with comparable sexual shenanigans, but with all these elements now spun into externalized, exaggerated form. Imagine that all these matters are intended as comedy, and the result is *Breakfast of Champions*.

Bruce Willis runs a prospering auto sales firm in Midland City and is omnipresent on TV and billboards as Mr. Smiles. Of course he is on his way to non-smiling troubles. His wife, Barbara Hershey, is both pampered and, in any significant sense, neglected. His deputy is Nick Nolte, trying manfully to hide his womanly quirks. (Nolte cross-dresses at home with his wife and is terrified that his hobby will be discovered.) Albert Finney is a lonely, nutty old writer, little of whose work has been published, and then only in porno magazines, who is quite unexpectedly named guest of honor at a Midland City

arts festival. These people and others are set against a wild cartoon of a production designed wickedly by Nina Ruscio, and they are all hustled along by Rudolph as the plot—almost literally—thickens.

If the above suggests that the picture is engrossing, apologies. It is too conscious of its eccentricities: it doesn't live easily in its texture, it keeps bragging tacitly about it. Willis and Nolte are more skilled actors than they are accounted by many—Willis's versatility is especially scanted—but farcical grace is not at their beck, and their director obviously doesn't know when they are flubbing. Finney's character is plopped into the picture abruptly—a different town, a different tone—and it takes too long before we learn his connection with what we had been seeing up to that time. Besides, he is never permitted to make sufficient connection with the others to substantiate what might have been a good performance.

Still, though it's wearisome to watch a long series of misfires in writing and acting, it's undeniably agreeable to know that this film exists. In a time when film genres are reduced in number—thrillers, sci-fi, adolescent gropings are among the few still in use—it's momentarily heartening to see an American film that tries to fly above the nervously sweating majority. And with two genre stars. Congratulations to Rudolph on his salesmanship at least.

Jakob the Liar

Peter Kassovitz

25 October 1999

Nothing shows up more clearly the difference between documentary and fiction film than the Holocaust. It's very difficult to make a poor documentary on the subject: if the footage is minimally adequate and the director is not a cheap exploiter, the sheer verity is bound to affect us in some degree. But with a fiction film, every possible aspect of the re-creation is suspect. With the documentary, we feel an awful privilege in watching. With the fiction, we approach with a thundering "Why? Why has anyone dared?"

Very few of the fictions about the Holocaust answer that question soundly other than *Schindler's List*—and that was based on a true story. *Life Is Beautiful*, which has brought fame and fortune to its pirouetting director-star, most certainly fails the test; so does the latest attempt, *Jakob the Liar*. The new film is based on a plot device comparable to Benigni's—a man under cruel German sway tries to cheer others with fantasy. It has comparable sentimentalities: instead of a little boy, here it's a little girl who is helped. But even if the comparisons had been less salient and if the music in Jakob had been less italicizing and mushy, we would still be left wondering why anyone had dared.

That question, of course, is falsely naïve. Some producer thought it would be shrewd to make this picture with Robin Williams, and Williams obviously agreed that it would be a good career move. (I have no right to doubt that he is genuinely concerned with

the history involved, but neither can I believe that he took the role with no thought of personal advantage.) The trouble is that neither of these answers is good enough.

The director was Peter Kassovitz, who, with Didier Decoin, derived the screenplay from a book by Jurek Becker. The scene is the walled-off ghetto of a Polish town; the year is 1944—it's set late in the war, I suppose, so that American or Russian rescue could be hoped for. Jakob, a former pancake peddler, has conceived the idea of pretending to have a radio, which would have been strictly forbidden, so that he can spread cheering stories among his fellow Jews. The authors have sweated to enlarge this premise, but that's really all there is to the story. It ends inevitably with fierce German pressure on Jakob to surrender his radio; then his heroism, to keep from destroying the hope he fabricated for his friends; then his consequent fate in front of them. The best moment in the film, the finest, is their dulled reaction to that fate after years of oppression. But the rest, alas, is Holocaust-film cliché. For long stretches of this slim, distended story, its tedium is another sign of its spuriousness.

Williams almost succeeds in governing his usual electric kinesis, trying to give Jakob the tempo of a worn but striving man. Armin Mueller-Stahl, playing that world-famous Jewish physician who often turns up in Holocaust fictions, has more natural gravity. Bob Balaban, as the ghetto barber, tries hard to find some truth in his part. The excellent Hungarian actor Ivan Darvas—remembered fondly from *Love* (1970)—is briefly visible as an ailing German general.

Three Kings

David O. Russell

1 November 1999

David O. Russell's career, brief as it has so far been, is astonishing. His first film, *Spanking the Monkey* (1994), was a small-scale story that seemed just a sharp comic look at familiar suburban materials until it slithered, shockingly yet comprehendingly, into incest. His next, *Flirting with Disaster* (1996), was a comedy about a man who had been adopted as a child and now was searching for his parents. It was produced somewhat more luxuriously because of the first film's success, but it was still small-scale. The success of the second led, not to a step forward in scope but to a quantum leap. *Three Kings* is, in trade terms, a major picture, large-scale and expensive.

But these are only data. The really remarkable fact is the extension of Russell's abilities. Not many young directors grow so prodigiously from one film to the next. Edward Zwick did it in his move from *About Last Night* . . . to *Glory*, and a prime instance is Stanley Kubrick's growth from *The Killing*, a compact thriller, to *Paths of Glory*, a bold drama of World War I. Now, in this regard at least, Russell joins the select circle.

Russell, who writes his own screenplays, based *Three Kings* on a John Ridley story. It begins in March 1991, in Iraq at the end of the Gulf War; American troops in the desert

are celebrating the cease-fire. Captain Archie Gates and a young woman are celebrating horizontally, but this is only one throb in the outburst of drinking and dancing and general yelping that is going on. Gates and friend are interrupted, and soon thereafter three soldiers bring him a small map that they have extracted from the anus of an Iraqi captive. (All the main characters, including an intrusive female TV correspondent, are labeled with an identifying line on first appearance, much as nineteenth-century theater programs used to do.) In the middle of the jamboree Gates deciphers the map and learns that the Iraqis have buried many millions in Kuwaiti bullion not far away. Considering where the map was found, we recall Freud's linkage of gold and excrement.

Gates proposes to the three soldiers that they commandeer a vehicle, hurry to the place, snatch the bullion secretly and go home rich. It will be quick and simple, he says. Of course we know that it will not be simple, or the picture would be over in eleven more minutes. (I wonder sometimes why smart characters like Gates, who have surely seen many films, haven't learned from those films that allegedly simple plans, in Robert Burns's words, "gang aft agley.") Just two of the complications: the TV correspondent suspects something and follows; the U.S. military find out about Gates's expedition and are considerably upset.

But Russell has more in mind than a heist that gets knotted. Gates and his three pals—the film's title is odd, despite a reference to the Christmas carol: there are four of them—encounter Iraqi troops loyal to Saddam, along with Iraqi dissidents who were captured and tortured by those troops. The adventure starts as a mad romp, like a latter-day *M*A*S*H*, with laughable discoveries of heaps of electronic appliances and luxe cars that were stolen from Kuwait, but it soon plunges into political complications, with danger and gunfire. The intricacies of Middle East policies and politics are only sketched, almost in comic-book manner; yet they are presented more or less as soldiers might have encountered them. Occasionally one of the Americans says he doesn't really know what the war was about. Later, when one of them is captured by Saddam's Republican Guard, he is forced to drink a cup of oil—motor oil—to prove a point about American intervention.

More troubling than the political roller-skating is the moral evolution of the American group. They begin as a group of pirates—not exactly admirable men, but credible. Then, as the story progresses, they develop conscience. It's easy to believe that, when one of the group is captured, the others make their way back into the heart of danger to rescue him. But these bullion hijackers then run considerable risks in order to shepherd a group of Iraqi dissidents across the border into Iran, and they give each of the escapees a bullion bar. The American marauders come back with nothing but the trouble they have incurred because of their escapade. Their metamorphosis into ethical grandeur seems ordained by the author because the screenplay lacks clarity of intent. If it was meant to show how self-serving grifters are touched to finer issues, it merely stumbles into that change. A transformation *à la* Frank Capra wouldn't have helped, but in this screenplay the change in Gates and his group almost seems an afterthought, to sweeten a cynical film.

Still, Russell does so well by his subtext that the flaws in the text itself become less bothersome. What he is after fundamentally is what Oliver Stone caught in the battle scenes of *Born on the Fourth of July* and almost all of *Platoon*: war is insane. Yes, it is hell, but, what may be even worse, it makes men crazy. I have never been in a war, but I have known plenty who have been, and I have heard. War makes men do things, quite apart from what they are supposed to be doing, that are crazy.

Russell whirls his film along with manifold devices and resources—the shivering explosions of cluster bombs and mines, the slow-motion narcotizing moments, the stop-frame click-click suspensions. (The editing, by Robert K. Lambert, makes us feel that we are floating alongside the action, spinning with its currents.) And underneath all these manifestations is Russell's view: war doesn't happen on earth to human beings. It happens in a different terrain to persons who once were human and will, with luck, get back there. The sharpest instance of this view is when the American prisoner of the Iraqis finds a cell phone in the bunker room and speaks to his wife in their Detroit kitchen who has their baby in her arms. He isn't calling for homey chat: he wants her to report to the authorities where he is. The collision of the two places, the kitchen and the bunker, is not between peace and war but between sanity and insanity.

Two performances stand out. George Clooney, as Gates, shows yet again that he was born to be a leading man in film. He never has to strain to be believable or attractive: he just has to do what he is asked to do and the rest follows. Ice Cube, as one of the Gates group, is solid, likable, earthy. Nora Dunn, as the female correspondent, caricatures a bit, but she conveys a belief that the war has been fought for her and is her property.

The Straight Story

David Lynch

15 November 1999

The viewer need not know David Lynch's reputation before seeing *The Straight Story*, but it helps. Here is a writer-director celebrated for his eccentricities, his disregard for convention, in such works as "Twin Peaks" and *Blue Velvet*, who has now done a picture released by Disney, a picture based on the true story of an old man making a sentimental journey. Anyone ignorant of Lynch who sees *The Straight Story* will need an extra mite of patience to allow its beauty to unfold; others will be curious from the start about why this unconventional filmmaker chose this material, and that curiosity will speed up the unfolding.

The title is not really a pun: it simply uses a fact with a smile. This is a story about a man named Straight. In 1994 Alvin Straight, a seventy-four-year-old resident of Laurens, Iowa, traveled eastward across the state to visit his brother, Lyle, in Mount Zion, Minnesota. Lyle had suffered a stroke. Alvin wanted to see him before both of them passed on. He wanted to patch up relations with Lyle, whom he loved but with whom he had

quarreled badly. Alvin was too infirm to drive a car, so he made the long trip on the only vehicle he could still manage, a lawn mower, to which he hitched a small trailer. It took Alvin many weeks to reach Mount Zion (this name is another useful coincidence), camping along the way and occasionally receiving hospitality from people he met. But he accomplished both his aims. (Alvin died in 1996.)

The story itself is *Reader's Digest* material. But with a concise screenplay by John Roach and Mary Sweeney, distilled in its dialogue and committed to verity of character, Lynch has made a small epic that echoes and enlarges in memory. He begins by insisting on the usual tempo of a Lynch film, an unapologetic *adagio*, implying that anything worth looking at is worth more than a hurried glance, unafraid of the latter-day shrunken attention span. Lynch's measured, attentive gaze assures us that he takes his story very seriously, and, unlike some other Lynch material, this story is so plain, so devoid of grotesquerie, that we soon see why he cannot be anything but serious about it. The subject is homespun, folksy; but to follow it with Lynch is to see Norman Rockwell become Thomas Eakins.

This is a resonant journey through a troubled life, encased in a grand deployment of the American heartland. We move through Alvin's past, including boyhood memories, memories of service in World War II, and the story of the seemingly impaired daughter who lives with him; but it is also a gallery of today's heartland people, including a runaway teenager whom he befriends and a Roman Catholic priest who befriends him (a Baptist, as he tells the priest). It is also, through the camera of the accomplished Freddie Francis, a poignant sprawl in the wide Midwest.

Soon we see that Alvin intends more than a brotherly visit. He refuses proffered transportation along the way because he wants to suffer the hardships of this journey; it is a penance, an expiation of past misjudgments. This journey is a gift that he is fashioning for his brother, as a craftsman might finish a fine object, which he wants to present to Lyle by the very fact of his arrival on this snail-paced lawn-mower; so he must make this trip alone, this trip that at first looks ludicrous and cranky but that soon seems a spiritual pilgrimage.

Every detail in the film is perfect. Something that is often overlooked in pictures about rural America is carefully tended here: the people's accents. I'm not able to say that they all speak like Midwesterners, but they all sound credible as country people, and every role, no matter how small, from the dealer who sells Alvin the new lawn mower he needs (Everett McGill) to another old man with whom he exchanges grim war memories (Wiley Harker)—every role is put in place like a small gem in a crown. Harry Dean Stanton, who has perhaps two minutes onscreen at the end as Lyle, is, in a grateful word, fulfilling. Sissy Spacek gives Alvin's daughter warmth and the requisite secret scars.

But all these excellences would come to little without Richard Farnsworth. Born in the same year as Alvin, wrinkled and skinny and white-bearded, quiet yet dogged, Farnsworth performs a miracle. He has been knocking around in films for at least forty years, has been everything from a stunt man to an extra to a minor supporting player, and has sometimes had prominent parts in the Wilford Brimley vein, the by-cracky likable old

hick. Here, no doubt aided by Lynch, Farnsworth understands his role as the one toward which his whole life has been winding, as if he were stepping into a better reincarnation of himself. It won't suffice to say that he never makes a false move: the highest compliment I can pay is that he made me think of the great Victor Sjöström in his last role, in Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. Sjöström played an old professor journeying to a university town to receive an honorary degree, revisiting his life along the way—a valedictory performance by an important figure in film history. Farnsworth, arriving from a quite different past, places Alvin in the same company as Sjöström's professor, an archetypal portrayal of an old man near the end. Farnsworth's voice lingers in the mind. At one point a young man asks Alvin, in a friendly way, what the worst part is about getting old. Alvin says: "The worst part is rememberin' when you was young."

But *The Straight Story* goes past honesty. Without satire, with calm admiration, it presents a national self-image. Every country of which I have any knowledge has such a self-image. America likes to think of its ideal personification as a self-reliant, stubborn, humane yet taciturn, courageous loner—or at least someone who is willing to be alone if the situation demands it. (John Wayne, Gary Cooper, James Stewart.) Lynch's film is bifocal: it treats Alvin with complete authenticity, yet it also sees his story as an ideal—senescent this time, yet essentially the cherished romance.

Congratulations to Lynch and Farnsworth and everyone who contributed to this extraordinary film.

Bringing Out the Dead

Martin Scorsese

22 November 1999

A chief trouble with Martin Scorsese's new film is that it has to strain to be a Scorsese film. Certain graphic qualities have marked most of his work, and as with any director of personality and style, those qualities had become as natural to him as breathing. But in *Bringing Out the Dead*, the formerly natural seems forced, redemptive, almost salvaging.

This sense of pumping, instead of flow, grows from the material he chose here and the people he chose to play it. *Bringing Out the Dead* is about the emergency medical service (EMS) in New York, the paramedics in the ambulances that respond to urgent calls for help. Joe Connelly's novel of the same name was adapted by Paul Schrader, himself a gifted director (*The Comfort of Strangers*, *Affliction*), who in 1976 wrote *Taxi Driver* for Scorsese. That earlier film had a lonely streetlamp texture that connects with this new film. But *Taxi Driver* enlightened us in some degree, took us into the beings of people who engaged us, if only in horror; very soon after this EMS story begins, we have a fair idea of where it's heading. There are few enlightenments of any kind.

Scorsese apparently understood this problem from the start. He knew that, in order

to keep us interested, in order to distinguish his film from the TV hospital serials that are chockablock with emergency-room crises, he would have to lay on the Scorsese style, which television could not approach: a kaleidoscope of ugly back streets and squirming, dingy lives, all captured in rapid-fire, hot-off-the-press editing—a frantic ballet of eternal night set to strident music. Those qualities are laid on here, but this time his style seems an attempt at recompense, even justification, for the familiarity and gawkiness of the material.

Nicolas Cage—of whom, alas, more later—plays the lead, a paramedic who is so ground down by the grimness of his work that he is nearly burned out. Responding to a call about a man's heart attack, he meets the man's daughter, played—another alas—by Patricia Arquette. Through the coursings of this attenuated film, built on the calls to which Cage responds in the three nights of the story, Cage and Arquette develop a sort of romance, not the usual boy-girl pursuit but the tumbling together of their lives, especially at the hospital, where she visits her unconscious father.

Cage's character is plunked on us early, largely through his voice-over descriptions of himself as a sort of ambulance-driving Hamlet. ("I'd always had nightmares, but now the ghosts didn't wait for me to sleep.") Arquette's character doesn't even have the limited benefit of a template. She is an ex- (but not quite ex-) druggie; there's a suggestion that she has been rather free in her sex life; she hates her father but now that he's in danger she is concerned, even though they've had rough times between them; so she's worn and tough but basically a good kid. Et cetera. All along, there are hints and additions about her, attempts to give her some sort of comprehensible being. But the ad hoc character-patching is hokey.

The defect is worsened by Arquette herself. To say that her talent is limited is to lavish praise on her. She doesn't act, she skims. Her superficiality is aggravated by her voice, which at latest count has three notes, none of them enticing. Cage at least has five or six notes, depending on how loud he has to be at the moment. Basically, his acting has two expressions: soulful melancholy, in which he suggests a bereft beagle, and screaming outbursts, which are always a welcome refuge for an inadequate actor. Every scene between Arquette and Cage—there are many—saps Scorsese's surrounding realism; and this drain on credibility turns his stylistic dazzle into first aid for the wounds that his actors inflict on the picture.

Admittedly, neither of these actors is helped by the dialogue. Connelly, the novelist, says that Schrader, the screenwriter, used most of the book's dialogue. I haven't read the novel, but if we take Connelly's word, then, on the evidence of the film, Schrader made a mistake. He should have rewritten. Much of Connelly's language in voice-over and dialogue sounds like the lyricism of 1930s metropolitan columnists. ("This city, it'll kill you if you're not strong enough.") The Styrofoam verbiage is yet another fakery that makes the cinematic realism look desperate.

The three different ambulance partners with whom Cage travels on the film's three nights are played acceptably by John Goodman, Ving Rhames, and Tom Sizemore. The last two characters seem like cases themselves, as if they ought to be patients, not

paramedics. With Rhames driving, the speeding ambulance overturns. (No patient is aboard; Rhames and Cage are unhurt. It's just a romp.) Sizemore savagely beats up a drug addict and is last seen smashing the headlights of an ambulance. And Cage, on his own decision, commits a mercy killing. Connelly was himself a paramedic for ten years and presumably based his novel on observation. If so, the EMS that he depicts is one of the bigger threats to New York's health.

The best work by any of Scorsese's colleagues comes from the cinematographer and the editor. Robert Richardson, who shot several of Oliver Stone's finest, uses his camera to dig into shadows, to write emptiness across nighttime streets, to render the glare of neon avenues almost obscene. One of the visual themes in the picture is the face of a teenage girl whose life Cage did not save. Her face haunts him, and keeps recurring whenever Scorsese thinks the film needs a bit of metaphysical poignancy. Richardson gives this dubious device as much appeal as possible, including a scene in which (with digital assistance, no doubt) her face appears on several young women in one shot. The film editor was Thelma Schoonmaker, who has edited almost all of Scorsese's pictures, understands his nervous energy, and can translate it into rhythm and abutment. Elmer Bernstein wrote the score, which he studded with rock numbers that shake the picture, Bernstein hopes, into pungency.

Scorsese has sometimes worked outside the contemporary city, notably in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *Kundun*. The first of these was by far the best of the three, partially because (as Pasolini did in *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*) he treated the subject in a modern key. In his two other off-beat films, he seemed to be confined, as if dressed in uncomfortable clothes, gifted surely but not quite at ease.

Let him be at ease, then, in underside and underworld films about New York; we'll be the beneficiaries. But let's hope that he won't choose future subjects just because they may afford him that ease. And let's hope that he'll be harder to please in his casting.

Rosetta

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

29 November 1999

The Dardenne brothers, Luc and Jean-Pierre, are the Belgian filmmakers who, in 1996, gave us *La Promesse*, a fine and unforgettable work. It burrowed into a chunk of rough proletarian life in Liege today, an environment in which the struggle to survive leads, ravenously, to the exploitation of workers by workers. Into this pit of vipers came an African family that showed a teenage Belgian boy—simply through their pride—that another kind of existence is possible, even in the muck. Now in *Rosetta* the Dardennes bring us another teenager, this time a girl, in another grim Belgian environment.

La Promesse began in cool slyness, as the boy stole the pension money of an elderly woman. Rosetta explodes on to the screen with anger, Rosetta's anger as she storms down the hall of an office building. She has just been fired from a job in that building, and she assails the boss because of his injustice. No use: she has to leave. And she takes her anger with her.

Anger is the *ostinato* of the film. Even when Rosetta is quieter, she is angry. She lives in a trailer camp with her mother who, most of the time, is either drunk or sleeping with some man or both; and Rosetta has to fend for her mother and herself. She doesn't complain about the conditions of her life: she accepts them, even the hopelessness of her mother. But she is not supine; she is fierce. Her life has turned her into a jackal, nipping at chances to exist. When she gets a job, which she does by reporting the thievery of a boy in that job, she fills it well enough; but the wounds and scars of her struggle, her simmering fierceness, make it unlikely that she will ever settle into conventional order. As we see.

The Dardennes, who write their own screenplays, heat their picture with Rosetta's fury. I can't remember another film that was shot so predominantly with a handheld camera. It's as if the girl's anger affected the very way in which her story is told. And the performance of Emilie Dequenne is so thoroughly immersed in this anger that, naively, we have to wonder what Dequenne herself was like between takes. Of course, this could be a question about any actor plunged into an extreme role, but Dequenne is so young and her performance is so relentless, so free of the self-regard that can tinge even good actors, that the question slips in.

No chance is skipped to articulate the squalor of Rosetta's life. (When she is out of money for food, she fishes in a pond near the trailer camp; when people fall into the pond, we learn how muddy it is, thus what the fish must be like.) The ceaseless fight for survival is in fact the firmest note in the picture. Since Rosetta never stops hating and fighting, no matter what happens, her struggle becomes a harsh tribute to inner strength.

But this relatively unvaried tone takes its toll on the film. In *La Promesse* the spiritual degradation was much the same, even though the boy and his father were comparatively prosperous, but the film moved to some wisp of hope for the boy. Rosetta is trapped, trapped throughout. A closing dash of Technicolor uplift would have been an atrocity. (The change in *La Promesse* was organic, true.) But the lack of even a catastrophe at the end of *Rosetta*, let alone uplift, turns the film into a dossier, the chronicle of a case. Once again the Dardennes are, quite obviously, greatly moved by the people with whom they deal, and they present the girl with insistent candor. But this time they have treated their subject as if they were making a documentary; and since it is fiction, their film leaves us with a sense of incompleteness, which *La Promesse* certainly did not. One wry truth about art is that it needs a little arrangement in order to seem unarranged.

The Insider

Michael Mann

6 December 1999

One of the great twentieth-century romantic heroes is the newsman. In American fiction and plays and films, the newsman, of the press or radio or television, has become one of our era's chief chivalric knights, a redoubtable champion of truth, unswerving in his devotion to the public weal. What's more, he becomes a paragon simply by his choice of jobs. If a young man—or a young woman—chooses to become a professional of news, he automatically steps on to an ethical plane higher than what would have been his lot if he had become a bond salesman or a grocer. Yes, sleazy newsmen pop up in fiction from time to time, but for the most part, if a person reports or edits news, or produces news programs, he is an idealist consecrated to verity. If he meets interference, he will go to the stake, or the unemployment office, rather than compromise.

Thus in fiction. And this rosy view is not entirely fictitious. Most of the newsmen I have met have been at least as ethical, as dedicated to truth and social good, as any doctor or lawyer I have known. But in fiction, the newsman glows brighter. With relative liberty of movement compared to those who are office-scheduled, with behind-the-scenes insight into seamy facts, he fights the monsters who threaten us. Let the world crumble around him: worn, wrinkled, coffee-sodden and sometimes drunk, he keeps his scutcheon unblotted and his lance free.

The latest instance of this romance is, paradoxically, based on fact. *The Insider* treats the relatively recent brouhaha caused by the revelations—first suppressed, then broadcast—about cigarette manufacturers on the CBS program “60 Minutes.” The screenplay, by Eric Roth and Michael Mann, derives, with adjustments, from a *Vanity Fair* article called “The Man Who Knew Too Much,” by Marie Brenner. That man is Jeffrey Wigand, a scientist once employed by Brown & Williamson, the third largest tobacco company in this country. Wigand was discharged, and because he knew shocking data about the contents of cigarettes, he had to sign a guarantee of confidentiality in order to get his severance pay. His tribulations after TV people get in touch with him are a major part of the story; but the film's protagonist is Lowell Bergman, one of the “60 Minutes” producers. His struggle to get Wigand on the air, untrammelled, is the central *agon* of the film. The accompanying struggle of Bergman's on-camera colleague, Mike Wallace, is a counterpoint.

After much travail, Wigand agrees to the interview with Wallace, which is taped. Then the CBS lawyers step in. One of them says that, if the interview is broadcast and Brown & Williamson sue, B & W may end up owning CBS. In the long run, after much chivvying and many (verbal) fights, the matter is worked through to the broadcast of an altered version of the original. This broadcast obviously helped engender the freedom to make this film.

The Insider grips; and one aspect that grips especially is (as presented) the naïveté of these weathered professionals, Bergman and Wallace—especially the former. It's a

naïveté that Bergman seems to guard zealously: a belief that news reporting can possibly be done without the slightest regard to any financial tugs that may arise. Bergman is an experienced man, yet he never clearly sees that the basic struggle is not between him, the truth-teller, and the dragons of deception, but between two corporations, each interested in its safety and profits. He never admits that “60 Minutes” is a hallowed program at CBS not only because of its intrinsic quality, but also because it ranks high in the ratings and makes a lot of money. Bergman must know all this, of course, but after his victory he leaves CBS because he feels disillusioned—that something in him has been “broken.” Along the way, one of the characters quotes, without attribution, a line of A. J. Liebling’s: “Freedom of the press is guaranteed to those who own one.” Bergman doesn’t hear, or chooses not to hear.

Anyway, the Bergman we see could not have been motivated solely by ideals. He is a professional in a job, trying to do well in that job, and the Wigand story would be a sizable feather in his cap. Professionally speaking, he stands to gain by it in prestige and, presumably, in salary. I don’t remotely suggest that Bergman is merely pretending to care: his fight is honest and unquestionably worth fighting. It is his shocked attitude toward the struggle, as shown here, that seems touched by romance. (Throughout, as troubles harassed him, I kept asking myself, “What else did he expect?”) As portrayed here, he is the archetypal newsman-hero of fiction, volcanic at his employers’ worries about their liability, fiercely proprietary of his share of the TV medium that in fact belongs to somebody else. In short, he behaves in this film, which is presented as fact, as if he were being filmed.

The patterns of the scenes are a bit repetitious—encounters flaring into dramatic exits by one or another character. The prelude, a Mike Wallace interview of a Hezbollah leader in Lebanon, doesn’t do much more than delay the start of the tobacco story. But that story has immediacy, and the dialogue of the screenplay is pungent. Mann, co-author of the screenplay, directed well. His best-known previous directing, *Heat* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, was adequate, but here he has a keener feeling for pace—and for wholeness. With the camera of Dante Spinotti, he aimed at a film that would transmute the hectic materials from splashy tabloid effect into a chiaroscuro of seriously troubled lives. (Spinotti is one of those rare cinematographers who know how to highlight with shadows.)

The cast is first-class. Russell Crowe as Wigand begins from the inside: he concentrates on the man, not the role; and whether or not this is the real Wigand, he builds his own Wigand, fully. Al Pacino, as Bergman, and Christopher Plummer, as Wallace, are marvelously matched by being mismatched. Pacino is the American realistic actor *in excelsis*, surprising us minute by minute with the lightning flashes and jagged fragments of encounter. On the other hand, Plummer, one of the best actors I have ever seen, most certainly in the classic vein, courses along smoothly next to Pacino, surprising us with a grace that comes from beautifully vitalized design. The two of them form a wonderful stylistic duet.

A last note. *The Insider* may set a record for the highest number of phones and phone calls in one film.

Ride with the Devil

Ang Lee

20 December 1999

Ang Lee continues his useful demolition. He is shredding the belief, or whatever is left of it, that a director can work well only in an environment that is really familiar to him. After several flavorsome films in his native Taiwan, Lee was chosen—perhaps by an amiable divinity—to direct *Sense and Sensibility*. Jane Austen in the hands of an Asian! Thanks, divinity: the result was exquisite. Then Lee did *The Ice Storm*, set in a modern New York suburb, a film unsuccessful because of its script, but quite at home in its setting. And now the American Civil War.

Ride with the Devil is not a conventional blue-and-gray drama. It is set in what was part of the Western frontier, the Kansas-Missouri border in 1862, where many units of either Northern or Southern armies were not deployed but where “irregular” groups of sympathizers on both sides fought bloodily. (And sometimes regular troops were involved.) The screenplay, based on a novel by Daniel Woodrell, is by James Schamus, an associate of Lee ever since the director left Taiwan. The first point to note about that script is the dialogue. Schamus has preserved what (I assume) was in Woodrell’s book: the locutions of the age, what we might call the Stephen Crane flavor. For me, the language itself, the curls of long-gone but once common phrases, fix the period at least as well as the costumes and the props.

The faces and the bodies are good, too. The Civil War was the first American war caught on camera, and anyone who has looked at photographs by Mathew Brady and others knows that the men seem less like our forebears than like visitors from another planet, snapped during their stay. Men don’t stand or slouch or sit that way anymore; soldiers don’t suggest a belief in gallantry. Lee has caught this unreal reality, the air of bravura amid the amputations and gore.

The film follows two friends, Jake Roedel and Jack Bull Chiles, who join a unit of Bushwhackers (Southerners) to fight Jayhawkers (Northerners). Another in their group is Pitt Mackeson, who dislikes Jake because Jake comes from a German family and German immigrants are predominantly Unionist. Also, just one among history’s trillions of contradictions, there is a black man, Daniel Holt, in this pro-slavery unit, there because of loyalty to his owner. Eventually the story’s focus is on Jake and his adventures, including his relationship with a young widow named Sue Lee.

But the screenplay has troubles. For all the profusion of skirmishes and battles, the hard riding and harsh confrontations, the story ambles. It never generates driving force or tension. (Even though Quantrill’s notorious raid on Lawrence, Kansas, slashes through.) The overall effect is of episodes, each episode of some interest but without much cumulation. The story winds to a kind of conclusion, when all that is left to do is to finish, but it seems a journey rather than an organic drama.

Tobey Maguire as Jake gives the best performance that I have ever seen by an actor who has almost no voice. He squeaks; but he manages to be attractive, even endearing.

Skeet Ulrich as Jack Bull has the requisite dash and grit. Sue Lee is played passably by the pop singer Jewel, but without any evidence that she should give up singing. Jeffrey Wright as Daniel keeps his own counsel and does his duty. A burning performance comes from Jonathan Rhys Myers as the malevolent but brave Pitt. His last scene, when he sees the blankness of his future and virtually asks for death, is the film's most trenchant moment. Tom Wilkinson, that sturdy English actor, can be seen moving through some wisps of a role. Possibly he was brought in for a part that was reduced in the editing.

Ang Lee has become a historical action director as surely as he became an Austenite or an expert on modern suburbanites. The most extraordinary aspect of his work here, besides his capacity for sweep in the riding and fighting, is the sense of his complete ease. It makes us think that, for a gifted director, taking on a quite different kind of film may be something like a gifted actor taking on a brand new kind of role. The first thing to be acquired is the right frame of mind. In this view, Lee had first to concentrate on thinking and seeing like an American who understands the story's atmosphere and quiddities. He has done it.

Sweet and Lowdown

Woody Allen

20 December 1999

Woody Allen's new film has the one great advantage that any Allen film can have: he isn't in it. He appears from time to time as commentator, but that's all. So there is enjoyment to be had from *Sweet and Lowdown*. This film does for a fictitious 1930s jazz guitarist named Emmet Ray what *Zelig* did for Zelig: it treats a dreamed-up character as the subject of a quasi-documentary. Ray, we are told, has the characteristics of a jazz musician of that day—real talent plus wash-and-wear ethics. He likes money, women, and drink; he loves jazz. We see plenty of the former; we hear plenty of the latter.

Sean Penn is Emmet and has learned the fingering of the numbers that he plays. (The actual playing is done by Howard Alden, who is terrific.) As an actor, Penn knows more than fingering. Dressed in 1930s clothes and adorned with a superfluous thin moustache—superfluous for Emmet, that is—Penn has clearly tried to search out any possible period characteristics of movement and gesture. In any case, he has come up with a man full of herky-jerky movements and contradictory basic smoothness of outlook. If we remember Penn's usual taciturn glowerings, we can see how far he has stretched in this part.

At the start, we see Emmet pimping for a couple of hookers, even though he is already a known guitarist. As he travels from place to place, his adventures with women include a long affair with Hattie, a mute laundress, played with (necessarily) silent-film appeal by Samantha Morton. Quite abruptly, Emmet abandons her and subsequently

marries the flashy Blanche, played without distinction by Uma Thurman. Meanwhile his career waxes and wanes and waxes, etc., and he makes his rare, now-treasured recordings. (All these fabrications are drawn from the biographies of various jazz musicians.) From time to time, as was the cognate case with *Zelig*, we get clips of various experts, including Allen, commenting on the life, or “life,” of Emmet. Threading throughout, for further verity, is the fictional guitarist’s reverence for the nonfictional guitarist Django Reinhardt.

It’s a simple, unstrained narrative, with no particular point except to present once again the contrast between a jazz musician’s character and his music. The difference here is that the jazz man’s troubles are not attributed to the blindness and the deafness of society. One question: I wonder how many viewers who won’t see press notes will know that Emmet is fictitious. This problem didn’t exist with *Zelig*.

The End of the Affair

Neil Jordan

27 December 1999

A new high in irony—sheer gall, really—arrives in *The End of the Affair*. In this adaptation of Graham Greene’s novel, the protagonist, himself a novelist, takes his lover to see a film made from one of his books. As they watch the screen, he keeps whispering to her, “Not what I wrote.” The film that we are watching, in which he says this line, is not what Greene wrote, either.

In his deep and compelling novel, Greene uses a conventional triangle situation—single man, married woman, her husband—as an armature for an unconventional drama of religious faith, its testing, its agony, its balm, its awe. The story begins in London in 1946 when Maurice Bendrix, the novelist, accidentally meets Henry Miles, the husband of his former mistress Sarah. The account goes back a couple of years to the beginning of the affair during the war; then, in the “present,” Bendrix re-meets Sarah, whom he has not seen since the affair ended two years ago, and their emotion is recollected in something less than tranquility. She is now gravely ill (we learn later). Her progress toward death and through stages of faith—recovered, questioned, born again bravely almost as a penance—are disclosed to Bendrix through a secret reading of her diary.

The “present-day” drama includes a rationalist preacher, whom Sarah visits secretly as a sort of test, and a private detective who leads Bendrix to this preacher. (Bendrix himself has engaged the detective. Henry has confessed to Bendrix his unrest about his wife’s odd absences; Bendrix thinks he wants to assuage Henry’s unrest, but surely Bendrix himself is curious about the secret visits she is making to someone.) It is this detective who purloins Sarah’s diary for Bendrix.

Right in the fabric of this understated story of a spiritual pilgrimage, Greene places

two miracles, also understated. First, the rationalist preacher has a large, livid birthmark on one cheek; this birthmark disappears after Sarah's death, a dying that is wrapped in religious *agon*. The medical explanations about the mark's disappearance don't convince, and the rationalist, frightened, abandons rationalism. The second miracle is revealed after Sarah's death. Bendrix meets her mother, Mrs. Bertram, for the first time. She is a Catholic, her husband was not; and she confides to Bendrix that when Sarah was a child, she had her daughter baptized secretly. Mrs. Bertram says that Sarah was a real Catholic "only she didn't know it." The clear implication is that, aware of it or not, Sarah was marked for God and that what happened to her in her last years was her unwitting Catholicism taking over.

And how does the screenplay by Neil Jordan handle these miracles? The rationalist preacher is turned into a Catholic priest whom Sarah visits secretly. The birthmark on his cheek is transferred to the young son of the private detective. (The boy follows his pa around, learning the trade.) Though the boy is of course not involved in Sarah's religious searchings—which Greene's rationalist preacher certainly was—she once happens to kiss his cheek; this "explains" why the mark left his face. Thus Jordan deletes the battle between rationalism and divinity, whose victory Greene assigns to God, and thus the defeat of rationalism is changed to a blessing conferred unknowingly by a woman on her way to paradise.

As for the second miracle—the secret baptism that grew within Sarah into a transfiguring blaze—Jordan omits it completely.

Aside from ravaging the spiritual elements in the novel, aside from other sorts of subtleties that are trashed, Jordan has vulgarized the book's very structure. Toward the end of Sarah's life, Greene keeps Bendrix suspended in a medium of complex emotions, on the periphery of the Miles marriage. One morning when his telephone rings and he thinks that it is Sarah, it is in fact her husband. Bendrix hears something strange in Henry's voice and thinks that Sarah may have told him about their affair. But Henry has called to tell him that Sarah is dead. "How conventionally we behave at such moments," thinks Bendrix, who, after the (unvoiced) shock, simply says that he is sorry. Henry doesn't "fancy being alone," and invites Bendrix over for a drink. In the course of time, Henry invites Bendrix to move from his apartment to some rooms in Henry's house. Bendrix accepts. Husband and lover—Henry now knows of the affair—are united by Sarah's death after she has gone.

This structure, which might even be called another miracle, is not good enough for Jordan. He has Bendrix move into the Miles house before Sarah dies, where the lover helps the husband to tend her sickbed. Greene's delicate suggestion that her spiritual presence lingers on after her death and changes the lives of these two men is cartooned into commonplace sickbed scenes. This change of course enlarges the role of Sarah for its actress and provides her with moments out of *Camille*. Especially since her illness is pulmonary.

Jordan's screenplay is not an adaptation, it is a devastation. It's so drastic that we are left puzzled as to why Jordan, who also directed, wanted to adapt the novel at all if he

was going to violate it this way. Greene's book is a work of art about religion, set amid involvements of the most banal kind. If Jordan felt obliged to squeeze and to distort—almost to apologize—for the religious theme, why bother with the book? I never saw the 1955 film of *The End of the Affair*, adapted by Leonore Coffee, directed by Edward Dmytryk. I remember avoiding it because, though Deborah Kerr played Sarah, Bendrix was played by that epicene nonentity Van Johnson. I regretted my decision some thirty years later when Greene said that, of all films made from his religious novels, this was “the least unsatisfactory.” Even this restrained praise suggests that, if there was shrinkage of spiritual elements in the Coffee adaptation, at least it didn't result in the dreariness of the Jordan film. The place that Greene gave those spiritual elements is not filled otherwise in Jordan's film: it is simply left empty. Hence the dreariness.

That dreariness is certainly not due to the Bendrix here, Ralph Fiennes. Apparently Fiennes is on his way to supplant Jeremy Irons as the refined, taciturn English sex idol of the day; but he is a skilled, chromatic actor, sensitive to half-tones in feeling and speech. Stephen Rea, an old associate of Jordan, plays Henry and is miscast. He does not convince as a high-level government official who is dignified yet almost pathetic because of his dulled emotional being.

The real disappointment is Julianne Moore as Sarah. She looks right and sounds right: her accent is as good here as it was in *An Ideal Husband*. But she is icy. Presumably Moore wanted Sarah's torments and yearnings to be private, as they mostly are in the novel; but she presents very little of the woman who contains these private storms. We get overt revelations from time to time, like the praying that she does after Bendrix is knocked flat by a V-2 bomb in 1944. (His quick recovery is still another miracle that she has wrought—again unwittingly.) But Moore leaves such moments uninflected. “Batter my heart, three person'd God,” cried John Donne. Moore conveys small sense of that plea.

Jordan, as director, gives us plenty of other batterings. He loads on fairly explicit sex scenes that tilt the film in quite the wrong direction. Greene, except for one mention of Sarah's experience of orgasm with Bendrix—none with her husband—keeps the emphasis on the specificity of these individuals, not the universals of copulation. Sarah's rites of religious passage, Bendrix's love-hate relationship with God as his rival for Sarah's love, are smothered in the way of all this flesh.

A pleasant final word. The story dwells in two time planes, the time of the affair and two years later, which is “now.” The editor, Tony Lawson, deals with this problem so deftly that it isn't a problem, it's a benefit. Lawson slips in and out of the two planes so lightly that past and present seem almost a metaphysical continuum.

Miss Julie

Mike Figgis

3 January 2000

It would have been odd to predict good work from Mike Figgis. This British director is best known in the United States for *Stormy Monday*, an imitation American gangster flick set in a small English city, and *Leaving Las Vegas*, a contraption in which an alcoholic man and a hooker find sudsy bliss together. Certainly, Figgis is not a man from whom we would expect a film of Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. At all. Or that it would turn out to be (even) as good as it is. Surprises are not often pleasant in the film world, so Figgis serves up double pleasure.

Comment on any production of this play must start with the cast. Either the two principals are excellent, or the enterprise is doomed. Figgis has cast those two roles superbly, with two British actors little-known here but who, I hope, will not remain so. Saffron Burrows is Julie and has precisely the face and temperament that the role needs, a beauty that promises trouble—for herself as well as others. When she sweeps in, the moody, tyrannical, teasing daughter of a nineteenth-century Swedish count, she brings an immediate air of class that is both her weapon and her prison, along with a sexual drive that we can almost hear seething. The best Julie I had previously seen was the Swedish actress Inge Tidblad, who came to New York with the Royal Dramatic Theater of Stockholm in 1962 and scintillated in the role, though she was sixty-one at the time. Burrows, in her twenties, as she would have to be onscreen, plunges just as daringly into the middle of the storm and swirls through it to the play's catastrophe.

Peter Mullan is the count's valet, Jean. (Strindberg gives this Swedish servant a French name to mark him as a man who is all too well aware of his class and is unquiet in it.) The best Jean I had previously seen was Christopher Walken, some twenty-five years ago. Mullan, though quite dissimilar in timbre, matches Walken in tacit strength, in smolderings and insolent competence. One not-so-minor point: Mullan is shorter than Burrows. Figgis thus deliberately defies the theater-film convention that a man must be taller than the woman who plays opposite him. Yet with a grim blend of reserve and drive, Mullan towers.

The third character, Christine, the cook who has been Jean's lover, is played by Maria Doyle Kennedy, a quite competent actress who doesn't quite fit. Kennedy, fine-featured, looks more like a cousin of Miss Julie than the earthy working-class woman that Strindberg presumably had in mind as contrast to her mistress. But Christine is a lesser role: the excellence of the two chief actors propels the drama.

Strindberg's play, in one long act, was written in 1888. (Why the opening legend moves the film ahead to 1894 is a mystery.) It is set in the large kitchen of the count's country residence on Midsummer Eve, an annual festival of song and dance with a smack in it of pre-Christian fertility rites. In the celebration outside, the twenty-five-year-old Julie has been dancing with the thirty-year-old Jean. Her excitement and heat drive her to follow him into the kitchen, where he has withdrawn to avoid the trouble

he senses may come from her. In the first section of the play, the two of them play their class roles, but they also frivol and flirt and quarrel and reminisce and draw closer to each other. When others of the servants are heard approaching with song and dance—salacious in tone—Jean takes Julie into his bedroom to avoid the others. There the pair make love. (In the film, the place where it happens is less luxe than a bed.) After the others leave the kitchen and the lovers return, the play explodes in lightning flashes of harmony and quarrel, of wild ideas for fleeing abroad together, of some disgust in each for the other, of pity, of despair, of Julie's perception of her bleak future. At the end, exhausted, hollowed, she asks Jean to order her what to do. She knows what he will say. With cool, god-like dispensation of a life, he hands her his razor, and she goes to her suicide. Some years ago a theater director who was planning to produce *Miss Julie* told me that his basic underlying design was to have Julie consciously-unconsciously headed for the razor from the moment that she first enters in high spirits. This of course is the quintessence of the tragedy.

In his epochal foreword to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg explains his view of characterization in the play: he maintains that contradictions and variations, rather than consistencies, are the core of human behavior. Though he was hardly the first dramatist to perceive it, his use of this truth advances the play through its reality more than its plot. This makes it a groundbreaking work. Eric Bentley says of *Miss Julie* that Strindberg “destroyed the French ‘well-made’ play that had been the technical basis of later Ibsenism.” Ibsen's *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*, though revolutionary in idea and intent, are molded in popular theater structures of the day; *Miss Julie* is not. The Strindberg scholar Evert Sprinchorn says: “Whereas Ibsen's plays are all exposition, *Miss Julie* is all climax and catastrophe.” Thus the play's very organism becomes part of what it is about.

What it is about, at its very base, is history. The transgression of class boundaries occurs here as much because of the century in which Julie and Jean live as because of their present actions. Without in the least being mere signet figures, they arise out of a Europe roiling after 1848. And as part of its historical relevance, this pre-Freud play is startling in its sexual insights. (Not incidentally, it is the first play I know of that mentions menstruation.) We hear about Julie's games with a whip that she played with her former fiancé, her dream of being atop a pillar, Jean's boyhood escape from the count's garden through an outhouse, his childhood sense of filth in relation to Julie's purity, his revenge for his pollution, which is what we witness. All these elements can be found in the Freudian index.

Helen Cooper, who wrote the screen adaptation of the play from a translation that she had done for theater production, obviously understands all these matters. She has tried to sustain them, but by her rearrangement and condensation—for cinematic fluency, as she saw it—she has hobbled them somewhat. (I can't clearly remember Alf Sjöberg's 1951 film of the play, but I remember being bothered by that adaptation, too.) Cooper's version moves the action outside once in a while; further, she—or Figgis—includes a number of fades to black, to denote brief passages of time, I guess. But this is precisely what Strindberg did not want—time-lapses or shifts of locale to divert the

play from its dynamics. *Miss Julie* takes place, except for the offstage sex, in one room and in real time: interruptions and rearrangements interfere with its almost Sophoclean wholeness.

The very existence of this film involves a collision of two arts, much more jarring than with most films of great plays. The difference is as much phenomenological as aesthetic. In the theater, part of the play's power is that it happens in the real time that passes for us, too, as we are sitting there. This not only gives the play a temporal shape, it heightens the *agon* of Jean and Julie. We see them going through it minute by minute. But any film, we know, is made over a period of time. Even if Figgis's picture was done in weeks, instead of the usual months, it was still performed in distended time; and the fade-outs only increase our awareness of this fact. To see a good performance of the play is, in an almost literal sense, to endure it—for an hour and a half. This experience is intrinsically impossible with a film because we know that it is composed of scenes shot over many days. And this fact detracts, too, from the effect of the acting, as compared with the theater. At the finish of a stage production of *Miss Julie*, the actors seem almost heroic for having passed through the fire—continuously—before our eyes. This precise effect is not achievable in a film.

Figgis does all he can do, and it is a lot, to controvert this ineluctable fact. With the lithe and darting camera of Benoît Delhomme (Figgis did some of the shooting himself), he keeps close to his people, pressing us against them so often and so intensely that we seem to feel their bodies and breath. Throughout, we sense that Figgis wants to beat his film's innate handicap, to give it a victory over its sensory difference from the theater. But for all his fervor, for all the fine acting he has evoked, when the picture is done, we miss the arc, the trajectory, of the play. It would have been pretty lame to nail the camera down and perform Strindberg's whole play in front of it, but a cinematic adaptation of this particular work seems like the old sci-fi device of trying to transfer a soul from one body to another.

Figgis, who has done the same for previous films, composed the score. His music is apt and helpful.

Any Given Sunday

Oliver Stone

17 January 2000

Oliver Stone's *Any Given Sunday* is schismatic. First, he plainly wanted to make the definitive film about professional football. The trouble with this aim is that pro football doesn't need definition: it defines itself on any given Sunday. Do we really need a film to clarify the elements of warfare, gladiatorial combat, corporate competition, vicarious sadism and masochism that every game lays right in our laps?

In his apparent eagerness to grapple with this subject, Stone settled for a story by Daniel Pyne and John Logan that is basically familiar: the coach's blunt locker-room talks, the player who risks his life to play with an injury because he needs the money, the final game that must be won. Stone then wrote the screenplay with Logan (and wrote himself in briefly as a sports announcer). Not one moment of the script as such is interesting, especially the by-play with the female owner of the team. (Remember Paul Newman in *Slap Shot* as a hockey player on a team with an attractive female owner.) Matters are not helped by Al Pacino's performance as the hard-pressed coach. As far as I've seen them on television, football coaches vary widely in type and temperament: still, Pacino never convinces as a man who has spent his life with athletes. In this film he is once again the frantic TV producer of *The Insider*.

But then there's the other side of the schism in the film: *Any Given Sunday* is dazzlingly made. Again Stone displays his enormous filmmaking gifts. From the opening huge close-up of a football, we know we are in the hands of a director whose powers will immerse us in the sights and (markedly) the sounds of football as we have never experienced them. Stone creates a sensory experience of football so stinging that it almost compensates for the weariness of the script.

The Talented Mr. Ripley

Anthony Minghella

17 January 2000

All of us remember that in every Alfred Hitchcock film he himself is briefly seen. In a sense he can also be seen in some films made since his death, and not briefly. The latest instance is *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. It's derived from the well-known novel by Patricia Highsmith, an immediate link with Hitchcock: one of his films, *Strangers on a Train*, was derived from a Highsmith novel. The linkage grows as we watch *Mr. Ripley* because it yearns throughout to suggest Hitchcock.

Tom Ripley is a young pianist who works as a washroom attendant in New York in the late 1950s. He plays the piano at a party and thus meets Herbert Greenleaf, a rich man with a wastrel son who does his wastreling in Italy. Greenleaf mistakes Ripley for a Princeton graduate like his son, Dickie, and he hires Tom to go to Italy and persuade Dickie to return. (A faint echo here of Lambert Strether's mission in James's *The Ambassadors*.) In a town on the Amalfi drive, Tom, who has gifts of fakery and mimicry, makes Dickie's acquaintance, and he improves matters by being amusing. Dickie has a girl-friend who is a writer, but like his other friends, he himself is dedicated to hedonism. (I was in Italy for a year at about this time and saw this genus of Americans at pumped-up expatriate play.)

Tom, it soon becomes clear, is both an adventurer and a velvety sociopath. He is after what he can get for himself and can adjust his morality to further his plans for wealth and station. Several shades of eroticism color his exploits, including, when advantageous, homoeroticism. Murder, unplanned but unblinked, arrives more than once. The finish of the film is as bitter and wry as all who have been enjoying the film would want.

The plot, which—even as compacted here—sounds like a possible Hitchcock, is supposed to be serpentine, coiling around us insidiously before we realize that we are trapped. But sheerly as plot, the screenplay has so many weaknesses that we must wonder at Tom's good luck: there are no passersby at certain crucial moments, visitors arrive and depart exactly when it fits the plot, the Italian police are helpfully inefficient.

The Talented Mr. Ripley would be only a somewhat pretentious, patchy thriller except for the Hitchcockian air that envelops it. I haven't read Highsmith so can't comment on the adaptation, but the adapter-director, Anthony Minghella, was being measured for Hitchcockian laurels as soon as he announced the film. He had made *The English Patient*, widely celebrated, and many critical mouths were watering in advance for the next feast. For myself, I thought his earlier film was distended and sententious, and ended ridiculously. (Even those who carol about his new film make quick, nervous remarks about its ending.) But what is unmistakable in *Mr. Ripley* and its reception is its entry into the Hitchcock circle. A film about deception and murder, smoothly edited, with flossy dialogue, with clues that are dropped somewhat pointedly in order to be picked up later, with an ironic finish—Minghella is mimicking Hitchcock much as Tom mimics a smooth Princeton grad. Well, Minghella will probably get his just deserts: *Mr. Ripley* is surely slated for the same academic analysis as the maestro's films. Academic analysts are always hungry for analyzable material.

Two members of the cast, Jude Law as Dickie and Philip Seymour Hoffman as a veteran idler, are vivid. Matt Damon as Tom is Matt Damon as anyone, doing and saying what is expected of him with passable ease. As Dickie's girlfriend, Gwyneth Paltrow, who was surprisingly fresh in *Shakespeare in Love*, returns to her previous blandness. John Seale's cinematography is disappointing. He worked richly in *Witness* and *Rain Man* and *The English Patient*. Here he reduces the Amalfi drive and the Piazza Navona in Rome and Santa Maria della Salute in Venice to postcards.

Note: Highsmith's novel was filmed once before, in 1959, by René Clément under the title *Purple Noon*. (I saw it but don't remember it well enough to compare it with this second try.)

All About My Mother

Pedro Almodóvar

31 January 2000

The recent flood of holiday films swept aside some discussable pictures. One of them is Pedro Almodóvar's latest, and, with the flood now down to a drizzle, there's a chance to look at *All About My Mother*. It's Almodóvar at both the top and the middle of his form, something we may have to become used to.

The term "woman's director," often used in the past for such men as George Cukor and Douglas Sirk, has a resonance with Almodóvar that doesn't apply to the other men. They directed what was given them, though no doubt with emendations: Almodóvar is not only the writer of his films, he begins them deep within a seemingly feminine interiority. This is rare among men. Female directors such as Chantal Akerman have made films with the same "insider" view, but Akerman begins with the advantage of being a woman and, to my knowledge, she hasn't often used this perspective as a vantage point for laughter—at the comic spectacle of maleness and of women dealing with men. Almodóvar is the only male director I know of who can laugh at men like a woman and who can offer men the fly-on-the-wall view of women's privacies. Women have verified this.

This director's particular view—glee in his insight, along with an over-the-top use of it that his female characters seem to enjoy—is immediately announced by his settings. Done here by Juan Pedro Hernández, every room seems just slightly larger than life, because of the leaping colors. Red is the dominant one here, and it's frequently echoed in clothes. This sort of design has two effects: it dramatizes character, and, in one of Almodóvar's clearest intents, it guarantees that we know we are watching a film. "These are reasonably real people," he seems to say, "but don't forget, they are performing their reality." (Implication: we all do it, even if we happen not to be in a film.)

So much for the top of Almodóvar's form. His middle is another matter. When he began his career, some twenty years ago, with such pictures as *Dark Habits* and *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, he seemed to burst forth, with satire ablaze, to revenge himself, like a good satirist, on the oppressive stupidities and hypocrisies of society. He was like a mongoose that had been penned up, furious and frustrated, and now had got loose to attack snakes. But, as the years tumbled by, he seemed to run out of hatreds. With most of his work after *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* (the film that donated Antonio Banderas to American dreck), Almodóvar has seemed to be searching for subjects, for targets. The gleaming satirical weapons are still very much there, but he has found less to carve up. In some degree he is now a rebel without a cause.

He can contrive screenplays. For *All About My Mother*, he contrived a good one, a sinuous trip through a series of bumps and surprises that is never tedious. But it all feels devised. Imagine a TV serial in which blue language is common, in which fellatio is viewed as one way for women to make a living and is a subject of hilarity among them, in which a young nun becomes pregnant and infected with HIV—imagine it all treated

just as incidents along life's television highway—and you have the tone of the new film. It has no discernible theme: its purpose is to surprise us with non-soap incidents in a soap opera about women. “Mother” in the title can be taken as Mother Eve. (Almodóvar says he derived his title from *All About Eve*, the Bette Davis picture, of which we get a glimpse.) He apparently just wanted to snuggle down in a nest of frank, unfettered women.

Manuela, about thirty-six, has a hospital job in Madrid. (Cecilia Roth is humane and lovely in the role.) She is a single mother with a seventeen-year-old son. The son is killed in a car crash, and she goes back to her native city of Barcelona to look for the boy's father. Arrived there, she takes a taxi to the Field, a mall for all kinds of hookers. Manuela sees one of them being assaulted, stops the cab and rescues the hooker—whom she knew eighteen years ago. She goes home with the hooker who, not long afterward, is revealed as a transvestite. (Antonia San Juan, very wicked.) What follows is too tortuous for summary. Some fragments: Manuela becomes assistant to an actress in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; she even goes on one night as Stella; the actress (Maria Paredes, neurotic but nice) is a lesbian in love with a junkie; when the young nun (winsome Penélope Cruz) enters the story—her pregnancy still a secret—she takes a hooker to her wealthy mother for a job; the mother is irate that such a woman has been brought to her home; then mom stamps back into her studio to continue her own profession, forging Vermeers.

All of the film—except for the sad moments dropped in like vinegar in a dressing—is brightly, uniquely amusing. It leaves us feeling concessive. If this concoction is the best that Almodóvar can do now, then let us have more. If his original impulses are spent, let us enjoy the afternoon of an ex-faun.

Not One Less

Zhang Yimou

14 February 2000

The extraordinary Chinese director Zhang Yimou was born in 1950, so he was only a high school boy when the Cultural Revolution erupted in 1966. Still, he (like others of his age) was thought to need revision. He was taken from school and in 1968 was sent to work on a farm. He spent the next ten years as a laborer on farms and in mills.

Somehow Zhang managed during those years to nurture an early interest in art and photography. In 1978 he was allowed to apply to the Beijing Film Academy and passed the entrance exam handily; but (a Chinese catch-22) he was rejected because he was five years too old—having been dragooned for the previous ten years into manual labor. For two months he protested to culture officials and finally was admitted to the academy. He graduated in 1982 and began the film career that, first as cinematographer, then as director, has won him world attention.

It is hardly a surprise, given his past, that Zhang's films have frequently dealt with rebellion against social and bureaucratic conditions, past and present. His first picture, *Red Sorghum* (1988), skewered conventions under which, in the 1920s, an eighteen-year-old girl could be betrothed to a fifty-year-old man. Among Zhang's subsequent films, *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) presented a young woman's struggle, in the 1920s, against her consignment as a rich man's concubine; *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) recounted a young wife's long fight with officialdom, in Red China, to get surgery for her injured husband.

In these and other films, Zhang created leading roles for Gong Li, the lovely and talented actress who rose with him to international fame. She is not in his new film. In fact, *Not One Less* is a triple surprise. Gong Li is not in it; it has no professional actors at all; it is not a protest against conditions past or present. On the complete contrary, it is about a girl's struggle to obey the system in China today. Thus, the realistic Zhang is here a neorealist, using non-actors, somewhat in the vein of the postwar Italians; and the insurrectionist Zhang, who had been smoldering from officialdom's grip on his early life, has—in this case, anyway—accepted the society in which he lives. He is here more concerned with individual character than with social opposition.

To a remote village in the mountains comes a substitute teacher for the little dilapidated school. She is a thirteen-year-old girl. The regular teacher, Gao, has to leave for a month, and his replacement, the only one available, is the thirteen-year-old Wei Minzhi, not much older than some of her students. Gao tells Wei that he had started the school year with forty students, but the roster is now down to twenty-eight. Most families in the area are poor and debt-ridden; many children drop out to earn what they can for their families. Gao tells Wei that, though the teaching is of course important, she must also see to it that not one more student leaves. He will give her some extra payment if she succeeds.

Wei is hardly equipped for the job but is serious and determined. Her chief lesson every day is to write a passage on the blackboard, then have the class copy it; but she also spends a lot of time keeping the students in class, hunting down truants, and so on. One morning she discovers that a ten-year-old boy, Zhang Huike, is missing; he has run away to the city to find work so that he can help his impoverished family. Wei sets out for the city to bring him back.

Her grit, in getting to the city—a bustling hive compared with the gaunt village—and then facing the problem of finding the boy there, is both impressive and comic. She has courage, certainly, but part of it stems from the fact that she is innocent. Her adventures in the city, somewhat Dickensian in travail and portraiture, wind into the heart of its life, its range of temper. The story ends neatly, with a general sense—also Dickensian—that it's best to finish things up and say "The End" fairly quickly.

The screenplay was adapted by Shi Xiangsheng from his own novel, but he had to change all the names. The name of every character in the picture is the actual name of the person in the part. Presumably Zhang used this procedure because his people were non-actors, mostly children, and he thought that real names would ease natural behavior. It worked. Zhang was not after coyness or cuteness or tears. He wanted the

schoolroom to be normal, a basketful of puppies, not every one of them lovable, and he got it. With the two leading children, he has been a thaumaturge. Wei Minzhi was a middle-school student in Hebei Province, Zhang Huike a primary-school student in the same province. Zhang got them to be themselves, a term that in performance is dizzyingly complex.

Not One Less doesn't loom large in the Zhang catalogue so far, but for what it signifies in him it is a milestone, and for what it accomplishes as film it is a pleasure.

Kadosh

Amos Gitai

14 February 2000

Kadosh was directed by Amos Gitai, the Israeli director who, too, was born in 1950. Gitai's screenplay, written with Eliette Abecassis and Jacky Cukier, is, as in earlier Zhang Yimou, an attack on accepted practices. The story is set today in Mea Shearim, the Orthodox quarter of Jerusalem, and is concerned with the constraints that orthodoxy places, or can place, on personal freedom.

The structure is plain and strong. Two youngish people named Meir and Rivka have been married for ten years. They love each other. But they have no children. Meir's rabbi tells him that, as a Jew ordered to propagate in order to fulfill the future, he must divorce Rivka and marry a fertile woman. Meir demurs; the rabbi insists. A doctor, female of course, examines Rivka and finds that she is not barren; the doctor asks her to urge Meir to have a sperm count, an idea that is out of the question for him. (Rivka doesn't quite dare to tell him about her own fertility.) The divorce proceeds, despite their love.

In a contrapuntal story, Rivka's younger sister, Malka, falls in love with Yaakov, a former member of the Orthodox community who has left to become a rock singer. The rabbi cannot permit her to marry outside the community. So she is married, against her wishes, to another man. Then she has a rendezvous with Yaakov.

Both stories end in ways that do not redound to the glory of orthodoxy. It is easy to understand the rabbi's point of view. He is not arbitrarily cruel; he has his own obligations, and the point of them is not trivial. But to understand is not necessarily to agree.

Unadorned and darkly predictable as the stories are, they hold us because of their chill; and because Gitai is a director, not a tractarian. He has cast the picture well: Yael Abecassis (Rivka), Yoram Hattab (Meir), Meitel Barda (Malka) are fixed movingly in their fates. Gitai shoots a good deal of the film in fairly large close-up, to concentrate on people with problems rather than on problems presented by puppets. He is greatly helped by his cinematographer, Renato Berta, the Italian who has worked with Fassbinder and Tanner and Rohmer and Resnais, among others. Berta understands the revelations possible in the human face.

The Quality Film Encouragement Fund of Israel refused to support *Kadosh* at any stage in its creation. Quality, quite obviously, was not the issue.

Ghost Dog

Jim Jarmusch

6 March 2000

A specter is haunting some young American filmmakers—swift depletion. Think of the careers that began attractively within the last couple of decades—Steven Soderbergh, John Singleton, and Tom DiCillo, among others—and note glumly where they are today. Or aren't. Aground, or laboring in films at a consciously lower level than their debuts. Certainly no outsider knows about the aborted projects or the sheer bad luck that can clutter directing careers; but all that we have to judge by is what appears on the screen.

In the more distant past, when costs were lower, interest in so-called independent film was lower, too. In the last two decades, a number of independent filmmakers—of features meant for general release—have won exceptional chances to work. And they have been recognized. But the subsequent films of many of these lauded independents have been strained or fabricated; and so it seems fair to infer that the dwindling of inner resources, not external conditions, has been a principal trouble.

One great difficulty for these independent people is their huge difference from the accomplished directors of the past: these newer people are, or want to be, total creators. Hundreds of American directing careers flourished for decades because the men in question did not have to originate material, they had only to choose from what was offered them. (Often they did not even have much freedom of choice: they had to take what was given them and do it as well as possible.) When a director had choices, they became part of the profile of his talent, and, in any case, usually he refined his material. But directors generally had little more part in originating their scripts than most theater directors have in writing the plays that they do.

Of course, in film at its height, especially abroad, it has been otherwise. The director has been in great measure—often solely—the screenwriter as well. This is the fullness that these later American directors have wanted, and that's how their careers opened. Then the fizzlings began. The notorious “second novel” bugaboo of literature has also afflicted the second and third and further films of many younger Americans. It's as if, like some first novelists, each director had one good work in him waiting to be born; and its quality made others expect more from him. But the cupboard was bare. So, under pressure from himself and others, he began to fabricate, or tried to, at the level of his first film. Apparently, however, not enough had happened to the director—happened inside him or around him—to provide him with material. Observation, ingestion, imagination, empathy, synthesis were all lacking. But he pretended they were present and cooked things up. Take Soderbergh. His first picture, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), was authen-

tic, coolly invasive, disturbing, unique; and then came *Kafka* (1991), which was only a carpentered arty contraption. In subsequent films he has become more skilled and less interesting.

There is no sadder example of this detumescence than Jim Jarmusch. *Stranger than Paradise* (1984) and *Down by Law* (1986) were almost shocking in their wryly bold disregard of film convention, in their calm purpose and savor. Then came *Mystery Train* (1989), which had enough clever touches of noir, along with other parodies, to keep us hoping. But it was followed by *Night on Earth* (1992), a mere stunt consisting of sequences in taxis in five cities around the globe, a transparent make-work project by a man with nothing really on his mind; and then came *Dead Man* (1995), a sort of Western that outdid the Coen brothers in mannerism and sententious vacuity; and then *Year of the Horse* (1997), a documentary about a musical group. (Jarmusch is also a musician.)

Now, with all the weight and melancholy of a tombstone, here is *Ghost Dog*, engraved with pathetic desperation. It's as if Jarmusch were scrabbling for ideas and finally dug up one about which he could pretend deep commitment. The protagonist is a black contract killer in an unnamed American city, whose figurative bible is a book about samurai tradition and who has adopted the samurai name Ghost Dog. He lives alone in a rooftop shack and keeps carrier pigeons, which are his only means of communication with the Mafia types who hire him for rub-outs. His only friend is an ice-cream vendor in a park, a French-speaking Caribbean black man. Eventually a wistful little black girl also gets to know him a bit.

Ghost Dog keeps quoting from his samurai handbook on the soundtrack, though the relevance of the quotation is not always clear. His impassivity about his killings is meant to make him some kind of quasi-spiritual pilgrim progressing through obedience to his retainer—the Mafia—to a death that will be his ultimate honor.

Even this compressed description will remind those who know Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai* of that quietly chilling film—about a contract killer in Paris who has the composure of a robot and a committed inhumanity. Immediately there's a basic inferiority in Jarmusch's film: Forest Whitaker, who plays Ghost Dog, has none of the icy power of Alain Delon, the Parisian killer. More: *Le Samourai* is free of the literal samurai decor meant to deepen Jarmusch's film. Melville's picture is forged in steel; Jarmusch's has the texture of the vendor's ice-cream cones—with Zen sprinkles. (There is another seeming derivative: a scene in which a man is building a boat on his rooftop. It's a reminder of Buster Keaton's *The Boat*, here given a Zen patina.)

For those who do not know the Melville (or Keaton) and cannot compare Whitaker with Delon, *Ghost Dog* may simply baffle. Why, for instance, do all the characters who are about to be shot—and there are many—accept their fates without a sign of fear? (Especially when most of these people look like outtakes from “The Sopranos.”) Why, when there are lengthy shootouts in the streets, is there no one around, and why does no one ever come to a window to see what's going on? Is this all samurai abstraction? Even if it is, it only emphasizes the basic puzzle: the purpose of the picture. Are we to think that it is about a killer who needs to aggrandize his job with samurai trappings in order

to pacify his soul? Delon's killer needs to justify nothing, needs no winsome little girl or friendly ice-cream vendor to prove that, underneath it all, he is a mensch. He is, almost in a doomed way, simply what he is, one kind of professional in a world of differing professions. Underneath his almost sculptural frigidity, he is of course a sociopath. But there is no "underneath" with Ghost Dog: he is merely a sociopath.

Jarmusch has filled in some more time in his career, but he hasn't advanced it.

What Planet Are You From?

Mike Nichols

27 March 2000

In 1942 the marvelous Ernst Lubitsch made a mistake. A master of sophisticated comedy—and of comic sophistication—he dared, in that dark year, to make *To Be or Not to Be*, a comedy about a Warsaw theater company and its twitting of the occupying Germans. That wasn't the mistake: the screenplay was fine. Lubitsch made a casting error. The leading actor of that Warsaw troupe, known for his Hamlet, which indeed we see a bit of, was played by Jack Benny. Millions of Americans adored Benny, a vaudeville and radio comic, for his drawl, his pauses, his quizzical inflections, his petty angers, but these were here the sole techniques of the character that he was playing, a great theater star, a tragedian who offstage was a sort of Molnár character. But owing to Benny's popularity, Lubitsch put this limited vaudevillian in the role.

Benny was unbelievable as a great actor and was clumsy as an offstage salon gentleman. And there in Hollywood all the while was Fredric March, handsome, dazzlingly gifted, who could have and should have played Hamlet, and who was already celebrated for comic acting, not for a skimpy repertoire of tricks. March was ignored; and a film that might have been a comic masterpiece became . . . a film that might have been a comic masterpiece.

Though *What Planet Are You From?* could never have been anything like a masterpiece, it could have been a high-wire circus act, kept spinning by a skillful star performance. But once again a leading role was mortgaged to popularity. It is played by a grown-up Pillsbury boy with a doughy face and a coarse grip on comic acting. Like Benny, or as Benny became, he is a television star, named Garry Shandling. His repertoire of tricks is even smaller than Benny's, and duller.

Shandling apparently had a lien on the proceedings. He and Michael Leeson wrote the original story, and then those two plus Ed Solomon and Peter Toland wrote the screenplay. Obviously all this concocting aimed to provide a vehicle for Shandling; but it is very much to the point of the picture's sags to note that a true comedian—like Kevin Kline—could have made it a romp.

It is a science-fiction farce. The leader of a planet far away wants to colonize the earth and means to do it by sending someone to impregnate Earth women. The males of

this distant planet, insofar as they are males, have been trained with laser-created Earth women, and the one who is selected for the mission is given an Earth name, Harold Anderson, and a penis, which the others on that planet do not have. Harold is aware that, in intimate situations with women, the penis will react and that, because it is an attachment, it will hum.

By turbulent means, he is put aboard an Arizona West airliner, lands in Los Angeles fully equipped with papers and bio, and begins work in a bank job that awaits him. Not yet quite svelte, he proposes sex bluntly to every nubile female he encounters, with no results, but finally he meets Susan, played by Annette Bening. She is a fortyish woman who has had an alcoholic, promiscuous life, and in time she responds to Harold's intensity. (Their relationship is a cartoon version of the *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* mantra. Susan is emotional and complex, Harold is more sexually single-minded.)

The rest of the story leads of course to difficulties, to discoveries, to partings and suspense. At last pregnancy occurs, and so does the investigation by a federal aviation official, alerted through the Arizona West turbulence. (The official is played by John Goodman, now so obese that, when he hustles, we feel that a cardiologist is waiting just off camera.) This is one more story with so many plot problems that much of its suspense is about how the writers will tie it all up. They do, no more credibly than the story deserves. We accept it because the film has to be finished and this is as good a way as any to let us get out and go home.

Yet the picture is funnier than Shandling and its other defects. The basic idea, in its Aristophanic phallic center, is amusing: a male who is newly penis-endowed looking with persistent innocence for a partner. Some of the scenes are snappy burlesque bits, and some of the dialogue is sharp. When Harold is at a bar trying to pick up a really hot but cool number, she hears the hum and asks what that noise is. He tells her that his penis hums. She asks dryly, "Because it forgot the words?"

That line and other comparable cracks highlight a cultural fact. Before radio and television, and even for some time afterwards, Broadway and its derivatives would have produced this comedy, and actors would have been saying those lines eight times a week for years. The more years the better. Now the actors have to do them only once. No wonder there are no more Neil Simons coming along on Broadway. Why bother with a local deployment of trivial wisecracks with the hope to be doing them in that same place for years, and in a limited number of other places for more years, when a film can take care of them at one swoop and scatter them to the globe? Of course this might be true of weighty theater pieces, too, but this one-time-only process seems more sensible with gags.

Mike Nichols directed—his latest film work since his own excellent performance in Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner*. Nichols is justly famous for his soufflé directing touch, beginning with *Barefoot in the Park* (by Neil Simon!), and he keeps this picture as bubbly as possible, considering that Shandling is on hand. And foot. Nichols lapses into a few banal touches like the spurting fountains outside the Harold-Susan bridal chamber, but maybe that's parody. Bening gives the film's best performance,

almost too close to verity for this farce, but, as she has shown in *American Beauty* and elsewhere, she is a talent it will be lovely to reckon with.

Erin Brockovich

Steven Soderbergh

3 April 2000

Every art has a mode in which it kicks off its shoes and lolls in its commonest denominators. In literature it's called a good read, in music it's sometimes openly called a divertimento. In film, at least among those who use the term "film" for the upper end of the cinema scale, it's called a movie. *Erin Brockovich* is one such.

The matter isn't determined by flossy content. Almost every story element here is not flossy. Based on fact, this movie's central conflict could hardly be more grave: a legal fight against a huge corporation whose power plant is poisoning people. What makes it a movie is that it clearly strives to be one, a picture that wants us to expect only the most accessible emotions, which are ladled out in the large economy size and which include a warming finish. And—this is almost always the case—which does it all through the persona of an attractive star.

This star is Julia Roberts, who has committed some career flubs since she burst forth in *Pretty Woman* but who, especially after *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *Notting Hill*, has become a true star—a one-person universe within which a movie can find space and light. More: the makers have provided the essential doubleness of a movie. They have contrived a vehicle for their star that simultaneously makes us aware of the contrivance and makes us grateful that they did it. I don't know whether Susannah Grant's screen-play deviates from the original facts or how far the director, Steven Soderbergh, has beatified Erin. Maybe every millimeter, in action and aspect, is true: if so, credit to the makers for seeing that it was a ready-made movie. If it's gussied up, they have at least done it enjoyably.

It is the early 1990s. Erin, a California divorcée with three small children, is hard up and looking for a job. Her car is smashed by another car, and a lawyer named Ed Masry assures her that she has a good case. She loses. Vindictively she barges into Masry's office and demands that he give her a job to make up for his busted guarantee. (Rosalind Russell, Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, are you drooling up there?)

Erin has no legal training, and not much education of any kind; but she is smart. She finds files in Masry's office that suggest a utility company's responsibility for illnesses in families living near the plant. She visits some of these people, gets information, and badgers her boss, who admires her in a wary way, into doing battle with a \$28 billion corporation. The woes and the setbacks are multiple, as are Erin's personal problems. (She develops a romance with a biker who lives across from her home and who takes care of her kids. Soon there's an inversion of the usual domestic problem: she is too busy

to pay attention to him.) We know, and in this case are glad to know, how it is all going to end.

The screenplay has some gentle touches. For instance, the triumphant legal decision happens offscreen. Instead of the customary courtroom scene with the judge pronouncing and the crowd cheering, Erin and her boyfriend visit one of the chief sufferers and tell her quietly about her award. The small-scale climax has a large effect. But the screenplay also has some tatters. At one point in the long legal fight, Erin gets a threatening phone call, and absolutely nothing comes of it. At another point Erin is desperate to find some crucial documents and gets them through a lucky meeting in a bar.

Maybe these things actually did happen: if so, then life is imitating art even in California. Did Erin really wear very low-cut blouses and very mini skirts and very high heels while she was doing all this work? (The real Erin is briefly visible in the picture, but she appears as a coffee-shop waitress, so we can't tell.) I hope so; because it keeps the picture factual while it helps to give Roberts a sassy, sexy mind of her own. Is the real Erin so salty a talker? I hope so, because again the verity (if it is) helps to make her a free-swinging child of her times.

By now Roberts has demonstrated all that she knows about acting and all that she is likely to know. It's enough. She does not delve deeply into her range of feeling, but she does have some range. Aaron Eckhart is reticently macho as the biker who loves his freedom and her kids. As Ed Masry, Albert Finney, a walking definition of the word "actor," has one of his largest parts in American pictures. It is not a greatly demanding role—it is something like the newspaper boss that Ed Asner used to do on TV—but the screen bulges with Finney's pleasure in doing it well.

Soderbergh directed with a nice mixture of ease and drama. If he is no longer the fresh breeze that he promised to be, he has at least become reliable. There are some subtle moments, but they may be due to Anne V. Coates, the seventy-five-year-old editor. (She also edited the sprightly *Out of Sight* for Soderbergh.) The opening scene is in a doctor's office where Roberts, seated in the visitor's chair, is applying for a job—knowing that she is unqualified and trying to chat things along as she feels her chances waning. The camera holds on her through this opening. Then there is a shot of the doctor, unimpressed; then another of Roberts running out of steam; then a quick shot of the doctor, saying "Look—," and he is cut off. His dismissal of Roberts, which we don't need to hear, is condensed to one word as we swirl on into the story. The rhythm of this first sequence tickles, and that last quick shot of the doctor flips us into the film. (Sorry: into the movie.)

Waking the Dead

Keith Gordon

10 April 2000

Two weeks ago, reviewing *Wonder Boys*, which has Frances McDormand in its cast, I noted that a year earlier I had seen her in an Off-Broadway production of a new play on the Oedipus theme by Dare Clubb, and thus I saw her film performance against the background of her work in that demanding four-hour play. Now comes *Waking the Dead*, starring Billy Crudup, who was the Oedipus in that production. As with McDormand, his stage performance, carefully designed and sensitively colored, was, for me, the background of his screen role.

The first benefit of my theater memory was patience: Crudup is not a cannonading film personality like Brando or Depardieu or Mastroianni who rides roughshod over any hesitation. We must let him work on us, assuming that the screenplay gives him the chance; and with his Oedipus in mind, it was easy to let expectation simmer. And rewarding. Crudup's previous films, *The Hi-Lo Country* and *Without Limits*, afforded him little more than the chance to be adequate. What I remember chiefly from those films is the fine modeling of his face, features that suggested some depth in him. In this new screenplay by Robert Dillon (from Scott Spencer's novel), Crudup, as he had done in Clubb's complex play, moves into those depths.

He plays a young man, Fielding, at several times in his life, 1972, 1974, and 1982—not in sequence but interwoven. Unbraided, it is the story of Fielding's love for Sarah, a political activist who reciprocates but who thinks him insufficiently concerned with her causes, or at least with the way she addresses them. At the very start Fielding sees a TV newscast announcing that Sarah has been killed by a car bomb while she was chauffeuring two Chilean dissidents who were the bomb's real targets. The film then flashes back to the Fielding-Sarah relationship in the past, how it began and grew. Along with this and equally important is the progress of Fielding's own career. He attends law school, gets a post in the Chicago prosecutor's office, then runs for Congress and wins.

But his career and even his love affair are only the scaffolding for the story's real theme, which is mystic. After Sarah is killed, Fielding thinks he sees her here and there, and near the end he has a long scene in his Washington office in which Sarah comes—or does not come—to him. It seems quite real, but the film ends with a doubt about whether it actually happened. The main work for Crudup in this script, for all its personal opportunities, is to make it credible. He gets little help from Jennifer Connelly, an actress of small appeal and minimal talent, who plays Sarah. Through his response to her, Crudup has to endow her with qualities that she herself ought to be supplying. And he has also to provide some rationale—odd though that word may be—for the film's mystic elements.

Crudup can help only so much, and does as far as possible. But what he cannot do is supply a point for the picture. It's missing. What is the whole twisty tale about? Much of the dialogue plods through familiar arguments for and against activism, but it is hard

to see how the appearance of this revenant, if Sarah really is one and really does appear, settles the disagreements between them. Are we meant to infer that the afterlife has enlisted in the earth's struggles for social justice? Or what?

The picture wouldn't even get to the point where those questions can be asked if it weren't for Crudup. With his performance, he decrees that the mystic elements disturbingly exist: his Fielding either believes that Sarah was not killed and comes out of hiding occasionally or that she is dead and is visiting from the other side. But Crudup gives us much more than credibility. Throughout the picture he lives in that lovely mixed realm of acting and non-acting that only good actors can enter, that sense of truth being made before our eyes by a skilled maker.

His key moment is a skillfully arranged scene, almost a set piece. Fielding is at a dinner table with his family after he wins the election. He bursts into a long speech—prompted by the confusions that Sarah's visitations have caused although he doesn't mention them. He announces that he will not accept his election, will not proceed into Congress. His family is stunned into silence. He pauses a moment, several moments, then smiles and says, in effect, that now he has gotten all that off his chest, he is settled and will go to Washington. The scene has the lineaments of a grand aria, and Crudup brings it off triumphantly. For me, furnished with the Oedipus memory, his treatment of the scene was the quintessence of a screen performance being blessed by theater experience. It made me eager for more Crudup.

Less eagerness, however, for the director, Keith Gordon. His previous films, *A Midnight Clear* and *Mother Night*, seemed like Hallmark Theater productions for holiday television. His directing here is less studied than before, but his choice of subject is right from the same Hallmark carton.

High Fidelity

Stephen Frears

1 May 2000

High Fidelity is an American picture that, for me, might as well be in a foreign language. For the most part, anyway. The setting is a Chicago record shop run by a pop maniac and two equally maniacal chums. Most of the passions and quarrels and jokes come from their fiendish knowledge of rock 'n roll, rhythm-and-blues, and such, about which they are fanatically accurate; and none of which registered with me. I have heard philatelists gabble in similar vein, but that was not a generational thing. Here I was so far out of it that I didn't even know (as I was later told) that this apparently "in" music is already fading for the newest generation.

The screenplay was adapted from a novel by Nick Hornby that was set in London. It centers on the amours of the shop's owner, John Cusack. He confides to the camera quite a good deal, thus enlisting a venerable device in an ultra-mod story. He is reluctant

to commit to any woman, a theme that itself is growing gray. But the director, Stephen Frears, the Englishman who made such dazzlers as *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, keeps the action brisk and the actors fresh. Cusack moves from moment to moment like the bouncing ball in a screen sing-along song. Jack Black is screwball-funny as one of his helpers, and Iben Hjejle—the Danish blonde who was the call girl in *Mifune*—is lissome as Cusack's Number One. (Modernity note. In the past, would a foreign actor called Iben Hjejle have been brought into American films without a name change? That's the most cheerily progressive item in this picture.)

Black and White

James Toback

8 May 2000

Once in a while a film appears that is more interesting as an occasion than as a picture. Such was *The Graduate* (1967), which, however it may have faded as cinema, remains a milestone in American screen candor about sex. Now here is *Black and White*, which has some filmic troubles but which may turn out to be a marker in race relations. Its subject, unarticulated but punchily dramatized, is envy: the envy of young whites for the ease and freedom of blacks. Obviously these whites would not be envious of impoverished, oppressed blacks; the whites are attracted here to hip-hop black musicians and the circle around them. The white youths in this film come from comfortable homes; the blacks are well-off, too. The theme isn't economic justice but cultural jealousy. For at least a century, jazz has been a strong link between American blacks and whites (a link, of course, with many peoples around the world). *Black and White* centers on linkage of a different temper, social as much as musical, nurtured by this new music.

The director-writer was James Toback, who has been trying for years with such films as *Fingers* to score sensationally—that is, to make a picture that would sizzle through its daring. Now he has succeeded. At once the term “writer” must be modified. Some of the sequences in the picture were done conventionally: lines were written and the actors learned them. But, as Toback himself has said, in many scenes—especially those with black musicians—he merely let the actors know what he wanted to happen and let them improvise. No one could sit down and compose this dialogue of broken phrases, repetitions, flyaways, and overlaps, especially when so much depends on emphases and intonations. These improvisations sometimes make the dialogue dense, but they certainly give it a buzz.

And this method meant inevitably that much more film was shot than was used. This is always true to some extent: here the extent had to be greater. It takes nothing away from Toback to say that *Black and White* seems to owe much to its editor, Myron Kerstein. It was the director who chose to begin shots with a moving camera—something that happens often here—but presumably it was the editor who arranged those

shots in ways to make the film course. A fixed camera is used sparingly, mostly for long shots. In most of the intimate scenes, including some intense close-ups, the film itself seems to be in motion.

Its shape and flow are the picture's prime assets. The rhythm of the editing accommodates the rhythm of most of the music we hear, not in mimicking, Mickey-Mouse fashion, but in pulse. More: the film's nearly incessant motion underscores its adventurousness, as if it were consciously advancing into new territory.

The setting is in and around New York. At the start two teenaged white girls are having sex with a black man in Central Park. One of the girls is then seen joining her family for dinner in their luxe home (with a black servant) and getting into an argument with her father who, among other matters, dislikes the gold tooth that she slips on with her black friends and doesn't always slip off at home. Obviously this is not standard parent-and-adolescent trouble.

This scene is intercut with a scene in a recording studio where black musicians are trying to arrange a recording date. A good deal of the subsequent action is set in the huge home of Rich, a black mob and music chief, where black people, mostly musicians, hang out, along with young white people—especially girls. The whites try to behave and sound and dress like their black friends. The blacks accept them, because the females are attractive and available and the males are servile.

One of the black men is a basketball star (played by Allan Houston of the Knicks); and a main plot strand is his collusion with an undercover cop to throw a game for fifty thousand dollars. (The cop's scheme seems much less a sting operation than sheer entrapment.) This leads to a crime in which a young white man is involved, and this leads to a blackmail attempt by the cop that is left unconcluded in the picture.

Brooke Shields, with dreadlocks, plays a filmmaker who is shooting a documentary about these people as their stories move along. (Why they permit it is not explained.) The filmmaker's husband, played by Robert Downey Jr., a Toback veteran, is gay. Both husband and wife make (unaccepted) moves on Mike Tyson—yes, that Tyson—who seems to be on hand in Rich's home as, for the most part, a fount of equanimity.

Several well-known black musicians are in the cast, but none of them is an especially effective actor, which is also true of the pleasant Houston. Ben Stiller, as the tricky cop, is the best actor in the picture. But even while *Black and White* is rolling, it seems to be telling us that what the actors say and do, though often sharp, is less important than the film's very existence, its record of a phenomenon. Whether *Black and White* represents a social step forward or backward or sideways is a subject for prophecy, not criticism.

Small Time Crooks

Woody Allen

12 June 2000

Woody Allen is relapsing again. Every time we think that he has learned from experience, he slips back. He made the enjoyable *Everyone Says I Love You*, in which he gave himself to a part within his narrow compass, then he blew his gain with *Deconstructing Harry*, where again he asked more of his acting than he could supply. Then came the appealing *Sweet and Lowdown*, which benefited greatly because he wasn't in it; and now he plunks on us an atrocity called *Small Time Crooks* in which he stars. He is not only in it, he's all over it. He is still so blind to his limitations as an actor that he gives himself a role that is wildly beyond him.

This new screenplay, too, is a lapse. It is a farce in which Allen is a failed minor crook who is married to a domineering wife and who is trying to make good somehow. He concocts a scheme to bore a tunnel under a bank and thus rob it. First, he rents a store two doors down (a hint of Conan Doyle's *The Red-Headed League*?) where his wife opens a cookie shop; then he and some pals dig a tunnel from below the shop that is meant to come up in the bank. The digging encounters accidents, and the tunnel comes up in the wrong place. (A hint of Monicelli's *Big Deal on Madonna Street*?) But the cookie shop itself is a hit; and one year later he and his wife are fantastically rich, dressing and living with a vulgarity that insults the vulgar. If that sudden wealth seems unlikely from cookies, equally unlikely is the device with which Allen impoverishes the couple later on. At the close, they are sadly wiser.

The story's creaky mechanics would matter less if Allen were a competent farceur. He is an amateurish disaster, flailing his arms constantly, pumping up energy hysterically, reacting to everything with such blatant face-making that he seems almost demented. It's as if he were auditioning for a vacancy in *The Three Stooges* and not making it.

His wife is Tracy Ullman, not exactly the Queen of Subtlety. Hugh Grant peddles some of his Mayfair suavity as an art dealer who wants to con Ullman in her rich phase and who drops her when she phases out. (Yes, that antique ploy.) Grant ought to be more careful about spreading his gloss around. He doesn't have that much to spare.

What is especially depressing about this picture is Allen's directing. Through the years he has become genuinely skilled, but most of *Small Time Crooks* looks as if it had been directed for early television.

Decalogue

Krzysztof Kieślowski

26 June 2000

What have Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* and Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* in common? Each was made as a series of television programs. To this odd source of film achievement we must now ascribe another fine work, Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Decalogue*. This is a series of ten films, each one slightly less than an hour long, made for Polish TV in 1988–1989. The series has since been shown at several festivals and on special occasions in various countries. Two parts of the series have been released here separately (and were reviewed in this column). Now *Decalogue*, widely written and talked about in the last decade, is released in American theaters in its entirety.

It arrives after some other Kieślowski films—*The Double Life of Véronique* and the trilogy *Blue, White, and Red* among them—have displayed his exceptional talent, as did those two excerpts from *Decalogue*. But the whole series, seen right through, surpasses my previous experience of his work. It not only belongs with the Bergman and the Fassbinder series as another prime instance of what has been called the amphibious film, one that thrives on both the small and the large screen; it breathes—it almost trembles with—compassion and insight.

The purpose, as the title and the number of parts make clear, is a series dealing with each of the Ten Commandments. At first this idea might seem suspect: too neat, too temptingly moralistic. But Kieślowski and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz, who have collaborated before, saw it as a chance for inquiry, not for sermon, ten avenues of exploration into the acceptances and the values of their world, investigations of the way the commandments still function and apply—if they do. This approach is so important to the work that comment on *Decalogue* must start with the screenplays.

Decalogue is fundamentally a Kieślowski-Piesiewicz project, subsequently fulfilled by the director. This view is more fitting in film judgment than is often acknowledged; and in this case it is absolutely unavoidable. All the parts take place in, or are connected with, a huge modern apartment-house complex in Warsaw. Each of the ten parts is separate and complete. A few references in later parts to people who were encountered earlier are only private nudges, not essential matters. In the best of the parts, the commandment is approached obliquely and is wrung for its deepest pervasive relevance, not thundered from a latter-day Sinai. For instance, the sixth, “Thou shalt not commit adultery”: far from marital stricture, this is about a very young, inexperienced man who lives in one of the apartments and who spies with a telescope on the sexual activities of an attractive woman across the courtyard, a woman whom he does not know but with whom he is in consuming love. Eventually she discovers his spying, which angers her, and the force of his love, which touches her. The episode concludes with the conclusion of that love. “Adultery” is seen here as the violation of a spiritual union rather than a legal one.

In No. 7, “Thou shalt not steal,” a woman in her twenties kidnaps a little girl who we think is her sister but who is in fact the daughter she bore when she was sixteen. The child was brought up as the daughter of the young woman’s own parents, the couple who are really the child’s grandparents. The true mother’s plan to abduct her child runs into emotional tangles that could not be foreseen. Stealing here has implications far beyond pilfering.

About some of the screenplay there must be reservations. Cleverness falters in No. 10, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods,” which is about two sons who inherit their elderly father’s valuable stamp collection. They begin as two brothers who are close to each other; the changes that the inheritance causes in them are predictable. In No. 1, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” the point is overly blunt. A youngish scientist learns a terrible but blatant lesson about the fallibility of the science that has become his divinity.

But, after the script, consider the directing. The screenplay’s beauties are magnified, and its lesser moments are generally overcome, by the intense power of the film as such. Possibly because it was planned for television but in any case very aptly, *Kieślowski* works in close to his actors a good deal of the time, making us feel almost like privileged intruders into private situations. He varies this visual approach occasionally with a long shot from a window above a street or a curious angle underneath someone’s crooked arm, almost as if to remind us that we are audience, not members of the cast, but for the most part we are in there breathing with his people. At the finish we are so immersed that we almost feel Middle European, saddened and seasoned.

For some unknown reason, *Kieślowski* used a different cinematographer for almost every episode. (One of them, Piotr Sobocinski, was used twice.) But the variety is imperceptible: the series looks like the work of one man. Almost all of the lighting depends a good deal on shadow—there is more side lighting than frontal lighting, so that the characters seem to be moving through textured lives. Most of the episodes take place in winter or cool weather, and the visual mode of the film agrees with the temperature. Often a splash of red or green, carefully placed, reminds us that this is a color film, but much of the time the frame has the no-nonsense gravity of black-and-white, intent not on news-photo candor but on shades of gray.

The music for the series was written by Zbigniew Preisner, and in every case, though individually in every case, it has a suspended, open feeling, a sense of exploration. Preisner uses only a few instruments and uses them sparingly, as audible atmosphere. In No. 9, for instance, a three-note figure, plucked, is repeated with variations throughout, suggesting astringency, the barrenness that is the theme of that part.

For the actors there can be only praise, even awe. What a fine company, each of them acutely cast, many of them surprising us as their episodes unroll with facets of character that are apt but unexpected. Some of these actors are as well-known in the United States as Polish actors can be—Daniel Olbrychski, Maja Komorowska, Krystyna Janda—and all of them are distinguished by three qualities. They all understand that the secret of realistic film acting is to let the camera find the performance, not to splash it

at the camera. They all understand that true realism is not a matter of veristic detail but of sensibility. And they all seem like aspects of a treasury, of a culture in which acting is esteemed as an agency of truth.

Kieślowski, who made eleven feature films, died in 1996 at the age of fifty-four. *Decalogue* has its first extended American theatrical engagement, too long delayed, at the Lincoln Plaza in New York. The first two parts are being shown together for two weeks, then the next two for two weeks, and so on for a total of five weeks. Engagements in other cities are being planned. *Decalogue* is also available on tape, a five-cassette set with two films on each reel, from Facets Video in Chicago.

With this film, like the other series mentioned earlier, it doesn't greatly matter whether the work is seen on a small or a large screen, since it was designed for the former and adjusts comfortably to the latter. However it is seen, *Decalogue*, like every good film, like every good work of art, immediately becomes a paradox: an intensely private possession that is shared with others.

Love's Labour's Lost

Kenneth Branagh

10 July 2000

William Hazlitt dismissed it: "If we were to part with any of the author's comedies, it should be this." But Harold Bloom has said: "I take more unmixed pleasure from this play than from any other Shakespearean play." Kenneth Branagh, if he had read this, might not agree entirely with Bloom but would certainly side with him against Hazlitt. He'd especially agree with a further Bloom comment on one of the characters: "The essence of Berowne is in that insouciant line uttered upon meeting a French lady-in-waiting in Navarre: 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?'"

Dance! Lightning could have flashed in Branagh's head from Bloom's line to a way of performing Berowne to the concept of transforming the whole play into a "dance" film. The play, of course, is *Love's Labour's Lost*, and it is now a Miramax musical-comedy film with Branagh as adapter and as director and as Berowne. The project was a promising possibility, not an instant sacrilege. The trouble is that the promise was not well-kept.

The plot of the play, cunningly symmetrical, is so artificial—like some eighteenth-century operas (*Così fan tutte* for prime instance)—that the artificiality is part of the fun. The young King of Navarre decides to spend three years in isolated study and thought, with no women allowed into his life, and he enlists three of his courtiers, chief among them the ebullient Berowne, to immure themselves with him. When the Princess of France arrives to visit the King, she and her three ladies-in-waiting become a threat to his and his courtiers' isolation. The pastry-chef architecture of the play invites music. Surprisingly, only one operatic version has been attempted: Nicolas Nabokov composed it in 1973, with a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. But of musical-come-

dy versions, even with *Kiss Me, Kate* as precedent, nix. (Note, however, W. S. Gilbert's relevance. He didn't use Shakespeare, but he reversed the play's idea and made the men invade the women's isolation in *Princess Ida*.)

Branagh saw it as "a romantic musical comedy," and he solved the problem of the score with what must now be called the Woody Allen device, after *Everyone Says I Love You*. Branagh used old favorites, songs by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and more. All of them are irresistible, and they are not anachronistic because he set the film in 1939. He commissioned Patrick Doyle, who did all his previous Shakespeare music, to supply horn-rich interludes, which are like flowing gold between scenes.

The lovely songs warm us up, but they are not exactly the equivalent of Shakespeare's language—some of his most savory and delightful writing is in this play—at least two-thirds of which has been discarded. If Branagh was going to cut most of the lines to make room for the musical numbers, the numbers had to compensate us. They don't. The deficit arises less through the loss of the language, granted the idea of the project, than through two blatant producing mistakes. First, much of the casting is dull or dreadful, most notably the two leads, Alessandro Nivola as the King and Alicia Silverstone as the Princess. They are inadequate in every way. None of the principal eight is impressive except Branagh. Further, he has cast a member of the King's court with an actor who looks a good deal like the King. Unhelpful. (There is one subtle touch in the casting: the King has one black courtier in his ensemble, the Princess has one black lady-in-waiting. We expect that they are intended for each other; but they aren't.)

Second, actors who are not singers and dancers are asked to do a great deal of singing and dancing. Some of the singing may have been dubbed, but it is still un compelling. Timothy Spall, for instance, the burly man who was so winning in Mike Leigh films, plays Don Armado, the Spanish poseur, and is assigned a Cole Porter song: he merely struggles to bring it into Shakespeare. (Odd, when we remember that it was Porter who kissed our Kate.) The dancing is worse. There wouldn't have been any point in improving the trite choreography; these people can just about do what they were given. What is the point in asking an audience to watch long dance numbers executed by people who are not, so far as we can see, dancers? When Peter O'Toole, as a loony lord, burst into song and dance in *The Ruling Class*, along with some of his townspeople, it was a bracing fracture of realism, and the pleasure was increased because none of these people were expected to be performers in the singing-dancing sense. But Branagh's actors are the cast of a musical comedy—that's what they are there for—and most of them just can't cut the mustard.

A few exceptions. Geraldine McEwan, who once captivated New York as Lady Teazle (in 1963) and who was Alice, the French lady-in-waiting, in Branagh's *Henry V*, here plays the schoolmistress Holofoonia (Shakespeare's Holofoornes transgendered) with her imperishable wit and charm. It is a treat to see McEwan tapping away and waving her arms as a member of the group backing up Nathan Lane in "There's No Business Like Show Business."

And there's Lane. He has become so smirkily ubiquitous on small and large screens

that we are tempted to dislike his self-adoration. But there's no doubting that, as Costard the clown, he fulfills the Elizabethan requisite. Many of Shakespeare's clowns were written, it seems safe to say, for specific performers who could be trusted to make them funny. The roles were not intended for straight actors, however good, who were not intrinsically comic. (Remember Michael Keaton's near hernia trying to be funny as Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*.) Lane is funny. That's what he starts from. Then he acts.

As for Branagh the Shakespearean, there is as yet no need to despair. A few weeks ago, after the death of John Gielgud, I cited Branagh as one hope for modern yet attuned Shakespearean acting. I still think so. In the patch that is left of Berowne's lines, he shows that he understands exactly what he is doing in Shakespeare and can do it with assurance. (Mark, however, that he and all the others pronounce "can't" and "dance" in American style. Is this a bow to Yankee globalization?)

Stanley Donen, the long-retired master director of musical films, is listed as a "presenter" of this picture. Perhaps it is the Donen presence that tickled Branagh into digging up some old Hollywood musical touches: a swimming-pool ballet with a bunch of pretty girls; the Fred Astaire chair-tipping (while dancing, Branagh steps onto a chair, puts the other foot on the back of the chair, and tips it backward as part of the dance); the sky hooks that lift the King and his three courtiers during a number.

Shakespeare's finish for the play is a refreshing conceit. The four men and the four women do not clinch and marry for a fade-out. Their unions are postponed for a year, mostly to test their loves. Berowne says of this conclusion: "Our wooing doth not end like an old play; / Jack hath not Jill."

Branagh evidently felt that Shakespeare's year of probation would be a tepid fade-out for a film, yet he didn't want to lose the unconventionality of Jack not yet getting Jill. So he throws in clips of the Second World War, in black and white, with some of the characters in some of the clips. Presumably this is why he set the film in 1939—so that he could "use" the Second World War as the cause of the delay in the four marriages. It's a somewhat grotesque choice for the finale of a spun-sugar musical.

The cheeriest point to make about *Love's Labour's Lost* is that, spotty though it is (the spots are the good moments), it is not a complete collapse in Branagh's career. It doesn't signal decline, it displays mistakes—lots of them. The old Branagh has the talent and plenty of time to recover. If he wants to.

Humanité

Bruno Dumont

31 July 2000

Serious films are usually either works of art or works of artiness. Compare, for instance, *The Straight Story* with almost anything by the Coen brothers. It is rare to find a

serious film that is marked with both strains; but that is the case with *Humanité*. Written and directed by Bruno Dumont, the Frenchman who made the ostentatiously dismal *Life of Jesus* about small-town youth, *Humanité* is a small move upward socially and a large move inward spiritually. But Dumont spends two hours and twenty-eight minutes wandering between humane inquiry and arty attitudes. Inside this cinematic mix we can discern a drama struggling toward the Dostoevsky plane, a drama that has earned *Humanité* festival prizes and widespread critical hosannas. But after two viewings I enter some reservations.

The setting, as in Dumont's first film, is his birthplace, Bailleul, a dull town in north-west France. At the start Pharaon, a local police superintendent—we'd call him a detective—discovers the body of an eleven-year-old girl who has been raped and strangled. The film ends with the arrest of the criminal.

The story is less a hunt for the criminal than the inner journey of the detective, a man in his thirties, between the opening and the close. Pharaon lives with his mother in a small brick house in a row of such houses. He had a girlfriend and a baby, but they are dead. Now his best friends are a neighboring bus driver, Joseph, and his girlfriend, a factory worker named Domino. Pharaon's personal life consists principally of hanging out with this pair, accompanying them to a restaurant, to a beach, even once watching them in the throes of intercourse. (He is not spying. He simply walks in while it's going on, watches impassively for a bit—Domino knows he is watching but doesn't falter—then leaves.) Pharaon is apparently a man in a condition of emotional stasis, fitfully struggling with it. At the end he is changed.

Synopsized thus, this may sound like a promising précis, and the film itself begins promisingly. The opening shot looks up a grassy slope; a man appears on the crest of the slope and runs across the skyline. Then we are close to him as he crosses a plowed field. Suddenly he falls to the ground, motionless. His eyes are open and still: we might think him stricken dead except for the sound of his breathing. This beginning is strange and strong, even though we do not yet know why he collapsed. Then comes the explanation. What we see next is a close-up of the dead child's vagina, ringed with blood.

The shock of that sight is a signal. Dumont is not merely concerned with harsh fact—a shot of her sprawled naked body would have done that—he wants to declare early on that his quality as an artist privileges him to break convention. That ghastly vagina shot is much less an insistence on the bestiality of the murder than on Dumont's daring.

The film continues in this markedly schizoid way. Recurrently Dumont creates moments of tension and implication—for instance, Pharaon's visit with his chief to the farm home of the dead child's father and grandmother, a sequence made heartbreaking through taciturnity. But the breaches of convention for their own high-handed sake continue throughout, mostly in quite ordinary sequences. For instance, on what is seemingly the day after the murder, we watch Pharaon bicycling through the countryside. That's the sequence. He is not going anywhere of relevance to the story: we merely spend a couple of minutes traveling along with him—a sequence that in no way deepens his

character but is there simply because Dumont wants to flout narrative convention.

Sequence after sequence further displays this indulgence. We watch Pharaon merely standing outside his house (the people in this film do a lot of standing outside their houses, perhaps because the weather is hot), we follow him walking, long takes in which we just accompany his walking. Another director might cut to Pharaon at his destination, but Dumont wants to disregard filmic pace and point. His excuse may be that we are to spend time, superficially placid time, with Pharaon in order to immerse ourselves in the man's inner experience. But this osmosis-by-immersion, something that happens with such directors as Antonioni and Jancsó and Bresson, does not happen here because we have not been led cumulatively, empathically, into fertile silence. Dumont evidently believes that if a film is merely slow and if banality is deliberately ladled on, profundity will be assumed by the viewer. With too much of *Humanité*, however, we are left with the manifestos of depth instead of the achievement.

Further such manifestos come from incidents that are left unexplained. For instance, Pharaon goes to England searching for clues about the crime, and while he is talking with two potential witnesses, he sees two men, complete strangers, in the courtyard below fighting fiercely. Relevance? Possibly we are to infer that brutality is inherent in humans—something that doesn't exactly need a warrant at this stage of the film. Then, quite contrary to the unexplained incidents, Dumont inserts some heavy-handed linkages. When Pharaon is working in his garden, a close-up of his hand in the soil reminds us of the soil he lay on near the start. When he visits a local museum, to which he has loaned a painting by a forebear of his, he is, with clunky obviousness, gripped by a painting of a little girl sitting on the grass. Later, there is an unexpected close-up of Domino's vagina, hardly a subtle reminder of the dead child. I suppose the later shot is meant to suggest the immanence of sexual drives and the violence often related to them—again, italics for the obvious.

Dumont's main theme is the emotional thaw in Pharaon, begun by the child's murder. The detective had apparently been chilled by the deaths of his lover and their baby, and now he is stunned, as shown by his fainting at the start, by the impact of the murder. Breached thus, he begins to be affected by the sexual activity of his two friends, as if the murder had sensitized, or re-sensitized, him. Domino apparently senses the change and offers him sexual play, which he declines. When he does eventually act in a sexual way, it is homoerotic. Three times in the film, and each time with someone in abnormal circumstances, Pharaon nuzzles a man's face sensually. With the last of the three, the confessed murderer, Pharaon not only nuzzles, he kisses the man passionately. Thus eroticism has been reawakened in Pharaon by the crime—its horror has actually made him scream a couple of times when he was alone—and the form the awakening takes is homosexual.

But this metamorphosis is only suggested in the film: Dumont is too airily arty to realize it affectingly. The very last shot of the picture caps his egotism. Pharaon is seated in his office after the murderer has confessed. Our view is of his back. We can just barely see that on his left wrist is a handcuff. Does this mean that Pharaon considers himself a

criminal, too? If so, why? Or is it out of some misty union, through reawakened sexuality, with the confessed sinner? These questions, Dumont loftily hints, are ones that only philistines would ask. (And let's add one more loftiness. The title of his film.)

Emmanuel Schotte, as Pharaon, supplying the semi-comatose performance that clearly was wanted, portrays what must be the most lethargic superintendent in the history of the French police. His incredibility as a detective—the fact that Pharaon is not a man but a writer's fabrication—is all the more patent in his one short sequence with uniformed policemen. Philippe Tullier is adequately macho as Joseph. The most impressive acting—admittedly the one role in which range and depth are possible—comes from Severine Caneele as Domino. Her features resemble those of the Dutch laborers in early Van Gogh, and she furthers this resemblance with the animality that is her one compensation for her existence.

Humanité had its American premiere at the Film Forum in New York and is scheduled for release in numerous other cities around the country. It is far from ignorable. The theme of the film is moving and grave, and it wriggles to dim visibility despite the filmmaker's self-admiring embroidery. Inside the arty Dumont, a true artist is struggling to emerge. Good luck to him.

The Wind Will Carry Us

Abbas Kiarostami

14 August 2000

The other evening I heard an orchestral piece called *Atmospheres*, by György Ligeti. It lives up to its name: it's a succession of moods, which seem to prepare for the entrance of a theme. But that theme never arrives. The composition exists through the validity of its moods, through its focus on material usually considered mere background.

This music is hardly a complete analogue with Abbas Kiarostami's style, but the next day, when I saw the Iranian master's latest film, it reminded me of Ligeti. *The Wind Will Carry Us* is much more complex, if only because it runs two hours and *Atmospheres* takes seven or eight minutes, but Kiarostami, here even more than in previous films, concentrates on texture, on "atmosphere," not on theme—which in this case would be drama or narrative.

The nub of the picture is simple. An engineer, whose name and work are never specified, arrives in a remote Iranian village with his crew, whom we never see. They have come from Tehran to make some sort of record—never explained—of a funeral ritual that will be held for an old woman in the village who is dying. They all expect to be there only a few days, but the old woman, who also is never seen, lingers and in fact improves. In the two weeks of the film, the engineer, a city man, gets to know villagers of many kinds, from a schoolboy to some elders. Several times he reports via cell phone to a woman—in Tehran, I suppose—who is apparently his chief. In order for his phone

to function, he has to drive to a nearby hilltop, and there he finds a man in a deep hole, digging a ditch. The ditchdigger converses with him whenever he is there; but we don't see that ditchdigger either. At the film's end the engineer's work, whatever it was, is uncompleted, yet this fact looks small against the large continuities we have glimpsed. The finish, quietly if somewhat neatly, confirms this view. Early in the picture an ancient human bone is unearthed: at the end the engineer tosses it into a stream. It is carried along.

Kiarostami is interviewed in *Film Comment* (July/August 2000). Interviews with directors are rubbery sources of insight about them, but Kiarostami is so clear, so fixed in his intent, that his remarks stick. He says that someone observed of his new film that it is about people who do not exist—the old woman and the ditchdigger, for instance. Kiarostami agrees:

The movie does have a physical essence to it, but it also has a nonphysical or spiritual side. We don't see some characters, but we do feel them. This shows there is a possibility of being without being.

The idea of being without the usual warrants of being—this seemed to me Ligeti's principle, too. Obviously it is a dangerous one for an artist. The success of such a work depends to an unusual degree on the audience, which always collaborates in a performed work but here has greater responsibility. Kiarostami (like Ligeti) relies on us to fulfill his film. Certainly he must invite us; then, if we are engaged, we do our job—rewardingly. What Kiarostami gives us here is beautifully inviting, and the rewards await us.

The opening shot is of wide umber hills. (The key visual tone of the film, in Mahmoud Kalari's camera, is umber.) In the distance a modern van is snaking along a twisty road, but we hear the voices of the occupants up close, discussing landmarks that are to guide them to a small village. The contrast between the distant car and the close voices suggests another contrast: these men know one another but are newcomers to this region. At a turn in the road a boy is waiting, appointed by the village to direct them. He is an immediate hint of the cordiality to come.

In dramatic terms, very little happens thereafter—more candidly, in dramatic terms nothing happens. For the engineer, who is played with gentleness and response by Behzad Dourani, the most exciting event is his discovery one day that the unseen ditchdigger on the hilltop has been trapped underground. The engineer summons help. Otherwise, only a great many small things occur around him, as they have been occurring for centuries in this remote place. Sometimes an offscreen woman's voice greets the engineer with flourishing Iranian phrases: he replies, and we cut to a shot of the woman who has already passed, carrying an immense load of hay or firewood. Both the ornate language and the heavy burden are part of the texture of the life around him.

Here is an archetypal scene. The engineer goes to buy milk at a woman's house. She directs him to the dark cellar where her cow is kept. There in the darkness, with only a lantern's light, he meets her daughter, sixteen, who declines to show her face or tell him

her name. The engineer sits and waits while she milks. While he waits in the dark, the engineer, in the mood of the place, recites a poem for the girl, a poem that contains the words of the film's title. When he finishes the poem and she finishes the milking, he takes the pail, pays, and leaves. The darkness, the cow in the cellar, the sound of the milking, create a fabric—of locality—interwoven with the sound of the poem.

Near the end, Kiarostami gives us a simple, huge sequence. Wheat fields ripple across the hills in the sun; then comes a nighttime shot of the village flecked with light; then comes a shot of the village at early dawn. This sequence is a film artist's way of articulating the word "time."

Dourani is, I gather, the only professional actor in the picture. Kiarostami, who has often worked with nonprofessionals, has developed his skills with them to the point where he can lead them to put themselves on film, sometimes in unexpected ways:

On-the-spot creation of dialogue has been necessary because it's the only way I could work with people who are not professional actors, and some of the moments you see in my movies have surprised me. . . . I don't give dialogue to the actors, but once you explain the scene to them, they just start talking, beyond what I would have imagined.

This openness in Kiarostami, his eagerness for this kind of surprise, underscores a major truth. Comment about him deals often with his concepts of cinematic intent, but I have read little on what seems to me fundamental in him: love. He loves the Iranian people. He loves being Iranian—the customs, the relationships, the formalities, the patterns of work, the patience. His use of nonprofessionals splashes a people's verity throughout his films, especially this new one.

At one point he wryly nudges those who are unsympathetic to his deliberate pace. The engineer comes across a turtle in his path, and, for no particular reason—perhaps just irked by its pace—he turns it on its back. He walks ahead. In a moment we return to the turtle. It struggles to its feet; then keeps on turtling.

Not many of us would want a steady diet of films conceived in Kiarostami's way, but then not many would want unvaried concerts of music like Ligeti's. Our expectations in art are socially nurtured, and our society—including our rural society—is far removed from Kiarostami's expectations. He understands this point; he says in that interview, "Many viewers may come out of the theater not satisfied, but they won't be able to forget the movie." His assumption is likely to prove true. *The Wind Will Carry Us* is a paradox: an adventure into the familiar—unforgettable because it combines a daring artistic vision with a reverential view of dailiness.

Solas

Benito Zambrano

2 October 2000

A film from Spain deals simply with a not-so-grand theme but an engaging one. *Solas*, which translates as “alone,” was written and directed by Benito Zambrano. It is Zambrano’s American debut—and very welcome, too.

An incidental matter of interest for an American viewer of foreign films is to note the way that foreign cities and towns cling to their historical character while they also try to keep up-to-date. Much in the streets of Seville, where *Solas* is set, in the dress of the young people particularly, is identical to what we will see when we leave the theater. “Where are we?” we can think, allowing for the different language. It isn’t until the film goes into an apartment house and we see the prettily tiled walls that we are absolutely sure—visually—that we are abroad. That wall proclaims Spanish Spain.

The title has more to do with loneliness than with the literal fact of being alone. The story concerns two women, mother and daughter, whose lives have been spent in inner isolation. The husband of the wife and father of the daughter, who is a middle-aged countryman, has come to the city for an operation. His wife, known only as Mother throughout, has accompanied him. She is not permitted to stay in the hospital, so she stays with her daughter, María, who has been in the city some years. The father, even while recovering in the hospital, is a mean-mouthed tyrant; María, thirty-five, a bit of a drinker and swinger, hates him because he wouldn’t let her get an education. (She now works for a cleaning service.) Mother, taciturn, comprehending, solid, understands both of them and simply lives with both in the mode that is needed for each. But she knows that she is not really close to either.

María, who exists in a torn, angry way, discovers that she is pregnant, by a truck-driver who treats her more or less as a utensil. He suggests a means of getting a free abortion which she investigates but recoils from. She doesn’t feel intimate enough with her mother to tell her of her condition, and she doesn’t know exactly what she’s going to do, except that she will have the baby. Mother’s sole adventure in the city is to become friends with a lonely old pensioner who lives with his dog in María’s building. Out of these elements, along with the father’s rasping unpleasantness when they visit him—not because of illness but because of his macho role as king of the family—this affecting film grows.

Admittedly, part of its interest (as with the city) is that it is foreign: it has some of the travelogue appeal that many foreign films have. But even if *Solas* were set in, say, Cleveland, even if thus at first the story suggested soap opera, that suggestion would dissolve in the film’s perception of character, its insistence on narrative sparseness, and the acting, especially the daughter and mother. Ana Fernández brings so poignant a gray weariness to María, along with a slim persistence of hope, that the somewhat familiar character ceases to be a character and is a realized unhappy woman. The old neighbor, Carlos Alvarez-Nóvoa, vitalizes his somewhat familiar role. (Even his old dog does a new trick.)

As for María Galiana, the mother, the simplest and best compliment I can pay her is to say that she often reminded me of Chieko Higashiyama, the mother in Yasujiro Ozu's masterwork, *Tokyo Story*.

Zambrano's ending is tinged with syrup, and we can suspect that it was a producer's requirement in order to get the film made (not a rare problem even among famous names). But what stays with us is Zambrano's double talent—a quiet and understated screenplay with directing to match. *Solas* marks an arrival.

Tigerland

Joel Schumacher

16 October 2000

It begins with a shot of a double-decker army barracks filled with sleeping men. A voice on the sound track says, "My father said that the army makes all men into one man, but you never know which one." A sergeant bursts in to wake the men with curses. Then *Tigerland*, a fiction film of open-pore realism, plunges into the training by which a company of recruits is bullied, shoved, and harried into becoming that one man. The war for which they are being trained is Vietnam.

The army's rationale for the rough training is, of course, that men in combat must be conditioned, and conditioned as a unit, so as to have the best chance to survive, to kill without being killed. In the midst of all the hacking and exhaustion, the men try to remember this. But they also know, as do we, that at this relatively late date—it is September 1971—they are being trained for a war that is politically and militarily bedraggled.

The place is Fort Polk, Louisiana. The recruits are told at the start that they will get eight weeks of training, then will be sent for another week to a military preserve called Tigerland where the conditions of risk and hardship are second only to Vietnam itself. We go the route with them. Some interludes occur when, with weekend passes, they drink and find women and fight among themselves; still, the picture's habitat is the corridor of training through which they are being hurtled toward that ambiguous war.

Films about military training are not scarce, but most of them are hard in manner and soft at the core, accounts of how seasoned commanders make tough soldiers out of civilian putty, with the men grateful and proud at the end. *Tigerland* shows us men more obedient than keen; yet, paradoxically, they share a growing awareness of group existence.

Within that group, differing sorts of spirits rise and fall. The screenplay by Ross Klavan and Michael McGruther, crammed with vitriolic dialogue, has as much plot as it needs to keep those fluctuations rolling. One soldier is the "problem" recruit: he often disobeys, is often sent to the stockade, yet remains stubborn. Another man has grave family worries that dog him. Another, the voice-over man, is a writer who scribbles at night by searchlight. These and other story lines course through, and, if somewhat ritual,

at least they serve thematic points, the sense of entrapment yet the sense of the making of a unit.

The director, Joel Schumacher, showed in *A Time to Kill* that he can deal in a spacious way with large-scale drama. Here, however, he digs in, almost claustrophobically close to the face-in-the-mud scramble of men whose lives will depend on losing the standards by which they used to live. To intensify this mode of change, Schumacher has chosen unknown actors, all of them better than competent but none of them recognizable from previous pictures, relative newcomers to us as to the army. This was a daring move on Schumacher's part, and it greatly helps his film.

Even more helpful is the style. The camera is handheld much of the time, slicing into these lives with abrupt turns and switches, giving us the sense of accompaniment. We are told that the film was shot in 16mm, and in a few of the sequences the enlargement to full-screen size is a bit fuzzy; but most of Matthew Libatique's camera work has documentary grit. Mark Stevens's ruthless editing underlines the frenzy.

The Vietnam War spawned some of the best combat films ever made, *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* among them. *Tigerland* is not literally a combat film, is not literally set in Vietnam, but, gripping from the first moment, it is something more than a faint souvenir of that war. It is a drama of men finding an enforced community while they are being readied for a war that has gone down in history as, in David Halberstam's term, a quagmire.

Dancer in the Dark

Lars von Trier

16 October 2000

The Danish director Lars von Trier is the prophet of the so-called Dogma style that discards such accoutrements as fancy lighting and sets. Von Trier's own films, chaste though they may be in technique, are nonetheless artificial in the extreme. *Zentropa* was a long wallow in sensitivity-for-sale. *Breaking the Waves* was opera posing as reality. The new one, *Dancer in the Dark*, is a large glob of aggrandized trash.

Selma, a young woman with a ten-year-old son, has emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Washington State in 1964. Why that state and that year is never explained. Selma has very bad eyes, is going blind, and is saving money—in cash—from her factory job to pay for a preventive operation on her son's eyes. A married policeman is in love with her. When he tries to take her money, she kills him—he even, not quite rationally, implores her to do it because she can't love him. She is tried, convicted, and hanged.

This plot might just barely have been acceptable in nineteenth-century melodrama—a mother, keeping her virtue, sacrifices all for her son. Here it is cheap sausage meat forced into an arty casing. The film begins with a rehearsal of an amateur production of *The Sound of Music* with Selma in the cast, and within two minutes, the whiz-

bang zigzagging of the camera says to us: “This story may look like drivel, but if it were drivel, would it be shot this way?” This mobile style may have inspired Joel Schumacher in *Tigerland*, but, because von Trier’s material is so banal, the master’s film seems a weak imitation of his disciple.

The handheld zigzagging is not all of von Trier’s stylistics. From time to time during the story, people in a scene burst into song and dance—in the factory where Selma works, in the courtroom where she is tried, on the scaffold where she is to be executed. In such films as *The Ruling Class* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the outbursts of song and dance had charm as a commentary on the theme, the disclosure of currents underneath. Here the song-and-dance is extraneous flummery, intended only to demonstrate further that the director is an artist.

These musical intrusions were presumably abetted, if not inspired, by the casting of Björk as Selma. She is an Icelandic pop singer with a feeble voice who writes her own feeble songs and sings them all through the picture. And that’s not all. Björk is appallingly fey. Von Trier has a weakness for mad young things: Emily Watson was cloyingly elfin in *Breaking the Waves*—it took more films to establish that she really is talented—and his gossamer creature here is Björk. English theater people use the adjective “twee” to denote something that is consciously cute. Björk is the queen of twee.

To confirm his myopia in casting, von Trier has put Catherine Deneuve—that is not a misprint—in the role of Selma’s sidekick in the Washington tinware factory. (And he has Deneuve sit in the front row at her pal’s execution.) What’s next on the von Trier agenda, Bette Midler as Lady Macbeth?

Ever since the velour artiness of *Zentropa*, it has been all too clear that von Trier is straining to be crowned as a genius. In the film world, that title is sometimes bestowed because of a director’s sheer pretentiousness. It isn’t quite true that, in film judgments, nothing succeeds like excess; but it sure doesn’t hurt.

Billy Elliott

Stephen Daldry

6 November 2000

The world—a bit of it, anyway—has been waiting for Stephen Daldry’s first film. This English director has acquired a large reputation in the theater, so large that there has already been a book about him though he is only forty. In the early 1990s, he was made head of the Royal Court Theater in London, and a couple of years ago he signed a three-year film contract. Apparently, as reported, this was not a change of venue but an extension of enterprise; he intended to become ambidextrous, a theater-film director.

Some feared that he might be leaving the theater completely. My breath was less bated. I thought his move less of a possible theater loss than others did because I had seen two of his productions and could not share the enthusiasm of most London and

New York theater critics. The two that I saw were Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (in London) and J. B. Priestley's *An Inspector Calls* (in New York), mediocre plays both, and Daldry seemed to have chosen them precisely for their mediocrity. Apparently he wanted to elevate lesser works with directorial "concepts," to prove that conceptualization could flourish at levels below the classics (already flooded with concepts); and he embellished both of those plays with scenic emphases and additions. But those productions reminded me of the donkeys that one sees abroad, loaded with burdens larger than themselves.

Now Daldry's first feature arrives, *Billy Elliott*, and, astonishingly, it is built on the very same principle as those two Daldry theater works. He has chosen a banal story and has lavished directorial ingenuity on it. But there is one important difference: most of his cinematic flourishes here are integrated and helpful, not egregious distentions. *Billy Elliott* is (as far as I have seen his work) the summa of the Daldry method so far, because film can ingest his inventiveness more organically than the theater.

The story of the picture, written by Lee Hall, is very likable. How could it not be? It has been likable for the whole century of film's existence. A youngster from a poor family has a talent, and against all obstructions, including some from his own family, wins through to success—and wins the belated pride of his family. Through the decades, the shape of the story has remained the same from picture to picture; only the protagonist's talent varies. It has been boxing (recently a girl fighter), music, acting, and more, but always there is a closing triumph, emotionally overflowing. To this ancient scheme of talent as upward mobility, Daldry has applied his own talent.

The place is a coal-mining town in County Durham, in the northeast of England; the time is 1984, when the great miners' strike is on. Billy is a miner's son, but he has only limited interest in the strike. He is mad for dancing. In the opening shot we see him putting on a phonograph record, then leaping up and down, in slow motion, against flowery wallpaper—Daldry's first evocative touch. Billy then fixes breakfast for his grandmother in a way that shows he always does it and takes it to her, but she is not there. Slightly loopy, she is wandering in the field outside. Billy gently brings her back. Thus, before the film is three minutes along, Billy's character is outlined: dancing, daily routine, family, tenderness.

Billy's father sends him for boxing lessons in the town's recreational center, but he is no good at it. One day, another group comes in to share the large room—young girls in tutus and ballet slippers with their teacher, the tough but knowledgeable Mrs. Wilkinson, who chain-smokes even during class. The die is immediately cast: Billy is more taken with ballet than with boxing, and Mrs. Wilkinson, struck by his interest, lets him join the class.

For a while he attends without his father's knowledge. When Dad finds out, he explodes, not least because of his fear that Billy will become a "poof," as he calls it. The screenplay handles this matter by giving Billy a coeval friend who is gay and cannot interest Billy in this way. (The filmmakers apparently felt they couldn't fight two battles

at once: freedom of talent and freedom of sexuality. Gayness is treated as a risk that Billy doesn't run.)

From here on, the screenplay takes an absolutely predictable course, with Dad being won over by Billy's outburst of dancing, not in the ballet class but in the grimy streets. When Mrs. Wilkinson arranges an audition for Billy at the Royal Ballet School in London, Dad even tries to join the scab strikebreakers to earn the money for the trip; but he is wrestled to the ground—understandingly, one might say—by his miner son, Billy's elder brother. Instead, Dad pawns his dead wife's watch and necklace and takes Billy to London. Billy is admitted to the school, leaves home, and we wait for the inevitable finish.

Daldry holds us through all this worn story because he treats it as if it were optimum material. In scene after scene he tries to enliven the familiar, not always freshening it. Here are some of his better touches. A girl of about five is standing outside Billy's gate when he first comes out; she is there when Mrs. Wilkinson calls; she is there when Billy leaves for London. It's a little like Josef von Sternberg, a suggestion of the environment's fixity while the protagonist changes. When Billy is on his way to school one day, he has to go through a field of policemen practicing subjugation of offenders, policemen who may be used against his father and brother and their chums. When Billy's bus leaves for London, it slides past us from right to left and deftly transmutes into a London Underground train years later, bringing the father and the brother to Covent Garden for Billy's performance.

Two scenes are truly subtle and lovely. After Billy's audition at the ballet school, he waits painfully for the letter with the school's verdict. It arrives. He takes it into his room, opens it, reads it, crumples it next to him and sits, almost tearfully, with a cushion on his chest. His family can't wait for him to come out with the news. They burst in, and Billy says quietly: "I'm in." Later, on his way to the London bus, to a changed future, he stops to say goodbye to the person chiefly responsible for it, Mrs. Wilkinson. He waits on a bench outside the gym while he hears her inside, teaching her dancers. She comes out, smoking. He says, "I'll miss you." She says, "No, you won't." She tells him that, when you go out into the world to find life, you lose past things. Then she returns to her class, still smoking.

Julie Walters, I am relieved to note, is splendid as Mrs. Wilkinson. In some films, Walters can act so strenuously that she intervenes between the role and the audience. In the recent *Titanic Town*, where she was a belligerent Belfast housewife, I kept wondering which particular annual acting award she was after. Here, with a Northumbrian accent instead of Northern Irish, Walters has only Mrs. Wilkinson on her mind—this woman's life of implied disappointment and readjustment, cautiously lightened now by a hope for Billy.

Gary Lewis is the father, stern, stubborn, aware that he has been limited by his life but not therefore ashamed. The only false moment is a close-up of his hands: those are not a manual worker's hands. Jamie Draven, as Billy's older brother, fumes and subsides and obliquely loves Billy, all forcefully.

Billy is Jamie Bell in his acting debut. He is surely a dancing prodigy, at least in the tap dancing that he does through the streets, bouncing off walls and fences as if dancing could be his escape. His acting is less overwhelming. Daldry has evidently worked hard with him in sensible ways, trying to elicit feelings, not to impaste them, but Bell manages to be little more than credible most of the time. His best moment comes at the Royal Ballet School audition when a woman on the board asks him how he feels when he is dancing. His reply, reluctant but warming, is clearly what wins him admission.

The one strongly objectionable element in the screenplay is the strike. (Glimpses of it are sometimes intercut with the dancing.) There is no shred of intrinsic reason why the film had to take place during that strike: the family's responses to Billy would have been the same in any case. The screenwriter utilized this immense national problem, and Daldry accepted it, simply as padding for what would otherwise have been a slim script.

Daldry's screen career—his theater career is another story—may really flower artistically when he doesn't have to prove that his material is worth his talent.

Boesman and Lena

John Berry

13 November 2000

Athol Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* is, by now, a great play. At least a generation must pass, I'd say, before one can use the word "great" about a new work without the taint of film-and-theater gabble. I saw this play in its first American production, Off-Broadway, in 1970—three times—saw it the following year in London, and in recent years have (as the phrase goes) taught it. *Boesman and Lena* easily weathers tests of time, of varied inquiry, of changes in self and society, and, more than surviving these tests, grows through them. One immense social and political change confirms this. Boesman and Lena are a South African colored couple in the days of apartheid, but the disappearance of apartheid does not date the play. It transcends topicality to underscore what has always been true of it; it is no more restrictively about a South African colored couple than Hamlet is restrictively about a Danish prince. The characters are, to one extent or another, ourselves.

In 1974, this three-character play was filmed, most unfortunately, with two white people, the author and Yvonne Bryceland, in the title roles. They are gifted actors and, in fact, they had played Boesman and Lena in the play's premiere at a South African university in 1969. But that casting was necessary because of legal restrictions at the time; in the film the brown-faced white actors were unacceptable. Now the play has been filmed again. It was shot in South Africa with two American black actors in the roles, Danny Glover and Angela Bassett; and it was directed by John Berry, also American, who directed the Off-Broadway production in 1970. Now Fugard's play has—almost—the

screen embodiment that it deserves.

The story is so simple that it is risky to tell it. Here is the summary in *Truths the Hands Can Touch*, Russell Vandenbroucke's book on Fugard:

Two colored itinerants arrive on the bank of the Swartkops River. ["Coloreds" are black people with white blood, distinct from "kaffirs," who are pure African.] They have walked many hours since their eviction that morning from their shanty. Such treks have marked the times and places of their relationship, yet Lena is uncertain about her identity and her past, which concerns her more than her future. She repeatedly presses Boesman with questions, but he replies with derision rather than answers. As they prepare for the night, an old black man wanders into the campsite and is adopted by Lena, who communes with him intimately through the night until his death. As Boesman prepares to flee, afraid that he will be suspected of murder, Lena declares her independence from him, then chooses to join him on yet another trek.

Through the fading of day and the coming of night, these two people, who carry the junk that is all they own, use it to build a small shelter for the night, quarrel, remember much—their trudging of the roads, their child who died, the babies who were stillborn. Boesman is powerful, angry, and has often beaten Lena; she is the more fragile yet the stronger. At this point in their pointless lives, they make some effort—Lena particularly—to determine who they are, how they will go on. Remembering how their shanty was bulldozed that morning by white men, Lena says:

It was too early in the morning to have your life kicked in again. Sitting there in the dust with pieces . . . bare assed! That's what it felt like! . . . and thinking of somewhere else again. Put your life on your head and walk, sister. Another day gone. Other people lived it. We tramped it into the ground. I haven't got so many left, Boesman.

Besides the fact that they both speak with South African accents, Fugard's writing in itself has un-English lilts. He has said that he conceived the dialogue in Afrikaans, which these people would speak in reality, then translated in his mind as he wrote.

A ragged old black man wanders in out of the vastness, and Boesman, who has called himself the white man's rubbish, addresses the old man with the word "kaffir" (or "nigger"). Thus, to the human spectrum already aligned here, another tint is added: hunger for superiority, particularly in those who have been abused by others.

The old man speaks Xhosa, which they don't understand, and, exhausted, he doesn't utter much of that. Boesman wants him to go, but, as night falls, Lena huddles with the stranger at their fire while Boesman, bribed with the bottle of wine that would have been Lena's, accepts the old man's presence and goes into their shanty. When he comes out about an hour later, the old man, still huddled under a blanket with Lena, is dead.

Boesman, apparently sensing that the old man's wanderings were a parallel to their own lives, his inability to communicate was a signet of their isolation, his death a prediction of theirs, is infuriated and beats the body, senselessly, almost in fear.

But he and Lena must leave now, quickly, to avoid trouble. They gather up their junk, and onward they trek. Onward. To quote my review in the pages of *The New Republic* (July 25, 1970): "The play's epic quality derives from the wide and simple arch of its compass: shelter, food, fire, children, quarrels, ego needs, endless pilgrimage."

The cast is fine. By coincidence I first saw Danny Glover in a later Fugard play, "*Master Harold*" . . . and the Boys, at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1982, the performance that brought him attention and success. As Boesman, Glover is fierce and cowardly, desperate and gloating, bitter and defeated and persistent. We soon sense that he depends for his masculinity on Lena, not because he can beat her to prove his strength but because it is her inner strength, which is almost a desperation, that really sustains him. Glover's dynamics could have used some shading: he is sometimes a bit too loud for too long (which was not true of James Earl Jones in Berry's New York production). Otherwise Glover's Boesman is this man and the idea of this man.

Angela Bassett, as Lena, is superb. No woman is ever likely to equal the Lena of Ruby Dee in that New York production: Dee's performance was one of the treasures of a lifetime's theatergoing. But Bassett comes close. Her accent (which is the easiest aspect for an acting talent) sounds perfect; her voice has the exotic music; her body has the angles and slouches and summonings that Lena's life has worn into it. Her intensity, her gentleness with the old man, her need to expend this gentleness, give us Lena.

Willie Jonah is the old man, and he shows, as was true sometimes in the past, that the right actor, the actor who can carry a whole life within him silently, can make this almost tacit role eloquent.

Boesman and Lena was the last work in John Berry's long film and theater career, much of which took place in Europe because he was a McCarthyite exile. He died in November 1999, just as the postproduction work on this film was finishing. He had made the screen adaptation of the play, with—in general—the love and understanding that he brought to his 1970 production, weighted here with his screen experience. His adaptation introduces flashback scenes of the couple's distant and recent past. These flashes are quick bumps in the work's "present" continuity, but they are their own reason for existence. Berry was not aiming at the usual fracture of a play for visual variety, his purpose clearly was to support his actors. In the theater the actors of Boesman and Lena must themselves re-create their past. Berry evidently thought that, if he had to condense the play somewhat for film purposes (which he did), he could, in a sort of compensation, use film techniques to aid his actors. He managed these flashbacks so adroitly that they do indeed support and fulfill rather than distract.

My one firm objection to this adaptation is not about those flashbacks, it is about the ending—for two reasons. First, Berry has Boesman and Lena walk away down the road hand in hand, which suggests that their troubles are resolved. They are not. If the film had ended the way it began, with Boesman trudging ahead of Lena, their lives

would not seem uplifted. Lena herself contradicts this warm suggestion; she says as they go: "I'm alive, Boesman, there's daylights left in me. . . . Next time you want to kill me, do it. When you hit, hit those lights out."

Further, her very last words in the play are "But not so fast. It's dark." The last stage direction: "They look around for the last time, then turn and walk off into the darkness." Twice, then, Fugard asks for darkness into which they tramp at the close. Berry adjusts the dialogue and changes the time of day to morning. Thus Boesman and Lena take on a touch of a newly resolved couple walking into the dawn of a new life, which was not Fugard's intent.

On the whole, however, the play is well-flexed for the screen. And the film is crowned with a paradox. Its cinematic being is enhanced by its original theater conception. Even with the insertions cited above, even in this other form, the picture rests on the basic image of the play as play—bare, classic, elemental. Two people arrive at a place, rest, confront their existence, then continue. Life flows, eddies for a moment, then flows on. It is a masterpiece.

The House of Mirth

Terence Davies

15 January 2001

By now it is a rule of thumb (well, my thumb, anyway) that a chief problem in filming a first-class novel is its prose. Other matters are much easier to deal with: extracting the plot, condensing it (usually necessary), and possibly rearranging it. But the better the novel, the less important is this plot-processing. The big trouble is in transmuting the very organism of a work in one art into another organism. Terence Davies's screenplay of *The House of Mirth* and the film he has made from it are painful reminders of that problem.

Davies is noted for two quasi-autobiographical films about his Liverpool boyhood, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, both of which traded in the commonest cinematic currency of working-class life and pathos. Here, braving the *bon ton* of New York in the early 1900s, he seemed uncomfortable throughout, as if he had been invited to an Edith Wharton party for which he was not suitably dressed. Class snobbery is hardly the point. (What had Ang Lee of Taipei to do with the class in his excellent *Sense and Sensibility*?) The trouble is artistic gift—Davies's lack of it.

Scene after scene, shot after shot comes along on an assembly line, the film seemingly manufactured as it rolls. Hardly ever do we get a camera movement or a framing or a sweep that suggests the grace and self-confidence of Wharton's prose, therefore of her world. Rich settings and good costumes help to a degree, but Davies's series of clunky two-shots and close-ups are the style of a director woefully aware that

he has none. This is emphasized by what is his greatest lack: apparently, he had no vision of the film before he began.

Some Parnassian instances of the reverse. Antonioni said that, before he started *L'Avventura*, he thought about making time and silence visible. Bergman said that he began writing *Persona* because of a flash that he had of two women in large hats sitting in the sun, talking. Davies—evidently—began with little more than the urge to put this novel on film, with no prior vision, however small, of its cinematic body. As a result, the film has little of the panache and none of the force of Wharton's tragedy.

The protagonist, Lily Bart, was created by an author who obviously loved *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*. (Early in her life Wharton even copied out passages from Flaubert's novel. Davies, in one of his few subtle touches, has Lily make her first appearance through the steam of a locomotive in a railroad station, thus suggesting Anna and her fate.) Lily, like her earlier sisters, is a woman crushed by being a woman—in a time when the understanding of women was not a requisite in the other gender. This devotion, more essential than plot data, eludes Davies. He gives us a succession of scenes disclosing Lily's poor decisions and unwise actions, but they are like a series of testimonies in a trial, isolated reports of actions rather than a cumulative swell.

His maladroitness screenplay and direction are only partly responsible for the debacle: his casting seals the picture's fate. Gillian Anderson, as Lily, gives what can be called an understudy performance. We feel that the actress who ought to have done it, Julianne Moore, was not available, so they went ahead with Anderson (just as Joan Allen in *The Contender* seemed to be filling in for Meryl Streep). Anderson is not hopelessly bad, but, as Lily, there is never anything more to her than what she says and does. Large talents enlarge roles. (Anyone who has seen Moore as Elena in *Vanya on 42nd Street* knows what Lily could have been.) Dan Aykroyd, a modern smart-ass, plays Gus Trenor, the society leader whose crude seduction attempts crack his polished façade; but Aykroyd is never more than a modern smart-ass, so there is no façade to crack. Eleanor Bron has been an amateur actress for thirty-five years, capable only of imitating performances she has seen. Here, as the imperious Mrs. Peniston, she continues her amateur career. Anthony LaPaglia, playing Rosedale, certainly looks different from the Anglo-Saxon types around him, but he lacks the combined ambition and wryness of the Jewish financier who wants a place in this society partly to prove that they are unable to keep him out.

Two of the actors prosper. As Bertha Dorset, who suspects that Lily is a threat to her marriage, Laura Linney wields a gleaming stiletto. And Eric Stoltz, as Lily's faithful friend Lawrence Selden, has dignified sweetness. If only it were worth visiting *The House of Mirth* in order to see Linney and Stoltz.

Faithless

Liv Ullmann

12 February 2001

In 1984 Ingmar Bergman wrote and directed *After the Rehearsal*, which took place on the stage of a theater. There were only three speaking characters: a theater director, Bergman given another name and played by Erland Josephson who was then sixty-one; an eighteen-year-old actress; and her mother, also an actress, who was a revenant—she had died some years earlier. Against the soft tinklings of suggestion in this piece, which was not as much a drama as a meditation, the principal theme was the interweaving of theater mystique and the mysteries of sex. Embracing it all was the fluidity of time: at moments two of the characters were glimpsed as children. The play that was in rehearsal at this theater was Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, and Bergman's screenplay is a tiny refraction of that giant work. At one point, the theater director, whose life is in entropy, says about encroaching age:

You lean forward and your head is right inside another reality. The dead are not dead, the living seem like ghosts.

Bergman is still leaning forward. He has written *Faithless* about a theater director, again played by Josephson, who this time is actually called Bergman. (Hoping to avoid confusion, I'll use "Bergman" to denote the character that Josephson plays.) "Bergman," now living alone on the island of Fårö, summons, out of the other reality, three people, a woman and her husband and her lover, and hears once again their story, which he already knows. "Hears" is the operative word: few leading characters have ever listened more than "Bergman" does. He has very little dialogue.

Faithless was directed by Liv Ullmann, whose acting was brought to the world's grateful notice by Bergman in 1965—in *Persona*, much of which was shot on this very island—and who now concentrates on directing. She has made four features, one of them from a Bergman screenplay, *Private Confessions*, a lovely film about the author's parents. Of this latest work Ullmann says that "it is based on a real event in Ingmar Bergman's life. He tried to write about this for many years," but was able to do it only when he found the right actress for the woman. As for the factuality, I can't believe that it is exceptional for Bergman: surely a good deal of his work was based on experience. Besides, for those "many years" he had with him such superb actresses as Harriet Andersson, Bibi Andersson, and Ullmann herself so he certainly wasn't lacking for evocation. I would venture that, with *Faithless*, Bergman simply wanted to have one more try at a subject that, as happens with many great dramatists, kept drawing him on and on. For Bergman that subject was Eros, erotic conflagration and ashes and agony in all possible prisms of the mind and soul—the sheer possibility and impossibility for men and women to live together. Such an artist as Bergman works with the skeptical hope that he is getting closer to understanding. The closure never happens, of course; but the

maze-wanderings of a major artist are our reward.

These visitors to “Bergman” tell us of their relationships, the sudden surprises of feeling, the unforeseen consequences, the torments, the hastily invoked braveries. Marianne is an actress, her husband Markus is a conductor, and they have a young daughter, Isabelle. The other man is David, a writer-director. They reenact their story which, as we learn, was long ago finished: “Bergman” is summoning it again almost as he might have put on a tape of a film. At the beginning, the Marianne-Markus marriage seems secure: she even scoffs at a suggestion that she finds David attractive. Yet very soon afterward she and David become lovers. Possibly the point of this quick contradiction is the ease with which sureness in such matters can crumble.

The triangular story writhes on, in one of their homes or another and with a sequence in Paris, always braided with returns to “Bergman” on the island. In the course of Marianne’s affair with David, temperature rises and falls, irritations and reconciliations occur, discoveries by the lovers and by Markus alter the chemistry. All three of them, as with many characters in Bergman’s films, are articulate in self-analysis. They keep prying open secret places in themselves, especially Marianne, talking about them to “Bergman” as if his listening were itself a clarification, even an absolution. (The welfare of the child Isabelle is always a concern, though never a deterrent to Eros. Ullmann said in an interview that she added the child to Bergman’s script. The Isabelle sequences are the only moments when the picture comes near to sentimentality. Compare the children in *After the Rehearsal*.)

As the title tells us, the film coils around the subject of truth—in love and sex. After the promises are given, human experience in marriage or in any union intended to be permanent ranges from absolute fidelity to a promiscuity beyond the mediation of “open” marriage. The oddity is that there need be no congruency between the observance of vows made in love and other vows. The unfaithful husband or wife can be as trustworthy in every other aspect of life—business, friendship, whatever—as the faithful one. Bergman, here as always, is concerned with men and women who think they know their minds in sexual matters and discover how changes in emotional landscape can affect them. Self-justification is part of the story, of course, but certainly not all. Once again Bergman’s characters are as much interested in honesty as in sex: they are just trying to find out how to make the two compatible.

But the trouble with *Faithless* is precisely that last sentence, that familiarity. This new screenplay accomplishes less than some previous Bergman works in the same region—*Winter Light*, *The Passion of Anna*, *Scenes from a Marriage*. Any viewer who has seen these films, as well as others of Bergman, may feel as I did after a while: we know what is coming—in general if not in detail. In the past Bergman has followed his master Strindberg into all the dangerous adventures of man-and-woman that he could plumb and, in doing so, has enriched us. (*A Dream Play* figures again in *Faithless*.) But this new film adds little to what he has given us already. And he takes considerable time to confirm this. Bergman’s best films average about 90 minutes in length: *Faithless* runs 155 minutes.

It is also hard to understand his wonder at the being and the performance of

Lena Endre, the Marianne. She is a completely competent actress, clearly skilled and intelligent; but her personality is somewhat bland, and she has very little sexual aura. (Compare her with the woman who was directing her.) Thomas Hanzon is quite adequate as Markus, but Krister Henriksson, as David, has a somewhat doughy face and a remote voice. His moments of outburst seem almost to come from another person. His character has to be taken on trust: we have to believe what others say about him because Henriksson doesn't provide it. The "Bergman," Erland Josephson, hardly needs comment. Josephson has one of those faces that speak when silent and a presence that brings with it a life that has been lived.

One important component of *After the Rehearsal* was not available for this later sibling piece: the theater. The air of the stage, which (as the earlier screenplay says) is crowded with spent emotions for those who like to fantasize thus, seeps into *After the Rehearsal*. Admittedly, for Bergman familiars, his Fårö cottage and the vistas of that gray beach, locales by now of our own treasured experience, almost compensate for the lack, but not quite; in *Faithless* the theater is much discussed, but the mystical-sentimental ambiance of the stage is out of reach.

Jörgen Persson's cinematography is wonderfully comprehending, which one would expect of the man who shot *Pelle the Conqueror*. Ullmann as director is both blessed and burdened by doing a Bergman screenplay in a Bergman setting—indeed, the very setting where, in *Persona*, she entered whatever immortality a film can afford. She has an eye for framing that helps quietly to dramatize. She has learned from Bergman how to make scenes between two people feel seamless even when she cuts from one person to the other. With her editor, Sylvia Ingemarsson, she has woven boding atmosphere right into the texture of sequence after sequence. Ullmann's burden of course is in the blessing itself: How can her directing possibly be judged on its own apart from Bergman? But it is a burden that is a blessing to bear.

In any case, *Faithless* and her earlier film written by Bergman, *Private Confessions*, constitute a phenomenon. A great writer-director may be waning, but an artist whom he fostered is a keeper of the flame.

The Pledge

Sean Penn

19 February 2001

The Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt is best known here for his plays, such as *The Visit* and *The Physicists*, organisms that seem to turn slowly as they proceed to reveal knives, gleaming, almost smiling. Dürrenmatt:

A story is thought through to its end when it has taken its worst possible turn. The worst possible turn is not foreseeable. It comes about through chance. . . . The more methodically men proceed, the more drastically

chance affects them.

This cold-steel fatalism is the center of a Dürrenmatt novel that has just been filmed in the United States.

The Pledge was adapted for the screen by Jerzy Kromolowski and Mary Olson-Kromolowski, who transposed the locale from Switzerland to Nevada. The adapters dropped the method of the novel—a man telling a story to a person he has just met, an ancient and sometimes chromatically useful device—in order to close in on the protagonist. But they have kept much of the shape of the original story, altering it to allow for particular character development.

The initial situation is a cliché of crime fiction, deliberately chosen by Dürrenmatt, I'd say, so that it could be used surprisingly. A veteran detective is just about to retire when a crime happens that engages him. The retiree, whose name is Jerry Black, goes from his retirement party with his colleagues when a murder is reported—a little girl has been raped and murdered up in the snowy mountains. Someone has to inform the child's parents, and Jerry does the dreadful job. The child's mother, wrought to extremity, holds a cross before Jerry and asks him to swear by his soul's salvation that he will find the murderer. Jerry swears. The fact that he swears thusly only a few hours before his retirement is the nub of the story in character terms. Possibly Jerry agrees out of shared horror and pain mixed with professional pride, but as the story proceeds, the motives, the detective's very texture, take on other shades.

The police arrest a man suspected of the crime. This man, an Indian who is mentally dim and has a bad record, soon confesses, and then commits suicide. Yet Jerry, who was supposed to be flying off on a retirement holiday, does not board the plane. Why not? Does he believe that the dead suspect was bullied into confessing? That is part of the reason, surely, but more develops. Jerry goes back to his office and, against his former colleagues' wishes, begins an investigation of his own. He digs up three previous murders of little girls in this vicinity, triangulates the area on a map, and buys a filling station in the center as a vantage point.

A brutalized woman and her small daughter eventually come to live with him, happily, affectionately. But Jerry is so obsessed with his pledge that he fantasticates dangers around this child. He ends by using the girl as live bait to trap a man whom he—in fact, somewhat validly—suspects. The last harsh touch is that this suspect dies in a car crash and we never learn if Jerry was mad or not. But the mother flees with her daughter, revolted by the way Jerry has used the girl. Jerry is left alone, disintegrating, bereft of purpose. It has become clearer and clearer through the film that his reason—unconscious, perhaps—for making the pledge was as much for a kind of examination of himself as a pursuit of justice. He swore by his soul's salvation, so something more than police justice was involved. We never learn precisely what he wanted—only that he didn't get it. Jerry remains something of a mystery to us and to himself.

A glimpse of the story's ending is where the film begins. The very first shot is of a

ragged shoe on a sockless foot and a hand reaching down to adjust it. It's Jerry. Then, as dark birds scatter overhead, he sits in the sun against the wall of his deserted filling station, muttering incomprehensibly to himself and nibbling at whiskey. The picture then shows us how he arrived here.

We are fixed throughout—despite a couple of small distentions—not only by the story itself but by the way it is told. The director was Sean Penn, who has shown gifts in acting and who has more subtle gifts in this field. His first directing work, *The Indian Runner*, was a burrow into a substratum of our society. *The Crossing Guard* was a ruptured piece of symbolism, but at least it was an attempt to get off the ground, to soar. Now, in *The Pledge*, Penn fulfills the promises of his first two pictures. He never takes a false directorial step.

The heat and cold of Nevada are his first textural increments. After the sun-baked opening at the filling station, the camera speeds across a frozen lake toward what turns out to be a fishing shack, within which a slightly younger Jerry is catching fish and sipping whiskey. This sharp shift is taciturn and engaging. Then Jerry drives down out of the snow to his tropical town, while the child's murder is being discovered back in the snowy mountains. This interplay of climates continues through the film as if to convey contradictions in the universe.

Then see the way Penn handles the suicide of the suspect in the police station, all the action confined within a narrow space that seems to increase pressure on the deranged man. (And note the hysterics of the policeman from whom the suspect stole the gun.) As the film moves along, as Jerry visits people in his private investigation, note how smoothly Penn handles a series of what could be called Raymond Chandler touches: devices to iconize new characters. A detective does weight-lifting in his office as Jerry consults him; a filling-station owner has an overweight daughter who keeps stuffing herself with food. Penn seems to be tipping his hat wryly to Chandler conventions.

Two "cameo" scenes form a contrast. Jerry visits the murdered girl's Scandinavian grandmother, played by Vanessa Redgrave. The old woman has already subsumed the horror into the consolations of a Hans Christian Andersen story. In her brief appearance, Redgrave transforms her scene into one moment of a complete life. Then Jerry visits a psychologist played by Helen Mirren. Mirren is difficult to take as an integer of that community or of this story. The woman asks questions that open apertures in Jerry, but Mirren's performance is only a turn by a visiting star.

The demented Indian suspect, who eliminates himself early, is played by Benicio Del Toro, a long way off from his charming Mexican detective in *Traffic*. Del Toro has been acting in films for five or six years, and now, suddenly, he has become a very valuable asset.

Jack Nicholson plays Jerry. This wonderful actor, apparently sent by Providence to be the archetypal American screen realist of his time, gives a performance that puzzles. Nicholson's concern to render the complexity in Jerry often renders him nearly impassive. His acting seems the result of a struggle to understand Jerry rather than to create him. Nicholson fills the screen whenever he is on—it couldn't possibly be otherwise—

but his mutterings at the end as at the beginning, again with the scatter of black birds overhead, seem as compounded of the actor's confusion as of the character's. Still, the screenwriters have made their own use of Dürrenmatt's idea of chance. A sense of the complexity of human motives, of the illusion that any motive can be absolutely pure, of chance as ultimate arbiter, hangs in the Nevada air as in the Swiss air.

A salute to Chris Menges, the English cinematographer (who has also been a director); he seems to draw the climate of a scene through his camera on to the screen. And the score by Hans Zimmer and Klaus Badelt floats in strands of ambiguity.

Me You Them

Andrucha Waddington

26 March 2001

A Brazilian film, *Me You Them*, is, to put it mildly, a different sort of film. The leading woman has no pulchritude, only talent; the plot is simply a series of domestic events; the intent is not to wow us but to give us the flavor of some people's lives.

The place is northeastern Brazil, a region that seems principally concerned with the raising of goats and of sugar cane. The skies are beautiful; but very little else is. At the start a young woman named Darlene, in a late stage of pregnancy, leaves her impoverished home, as her weary mother hopes that she never comes back but at least has a son. Darlene is left in the lurch when her groom never appears at the altar; she throws away her veil and gets a lift on a truck.

Three years later she returns with her boy on the day of her mother's funeral, and she takes over the house. In time the middle-aged owner of the house, whose chief occupation is to lie in a hammock and listen to his transistor radio, persuades her to marry him. Subsequently she has three more sons, each with a different father (none of whom is her husband). No one seems particularly disturbed by this, least of all the husband. Largely the course of the film is a series of adjustments to things that happen, rather than a struggle with them.

The odd and appealing quality of the picture is that, for all the varied couplings and consequences, it has no air of lubricity, only of good feeling. We are shown a group of people, one woman and several men, for whom morality is apparently a matter of daily choices, not of overriding precepts. If one lives considerately and generously, they seem to say, one lives morally. And the film doesn't even overtly promote this idea: this belief is just what happens in it.

I doubt that Elena Soarez, who wrote the screenplay, and Andrucha Waddington, who directed, are maintaining that this is the way that women usually live in this region—simply that it is far from impossible. The film enjoys the characters of these people and their accommodation of stricture to circumstance. The cast helps tremendously. Regina Casé gives easy womanliness to Darlene; Lima Duarte is gruffly con-

cerned as her husband; Stênio Garcia and Luiz Carlos Vasconcelos are congenial as the two other resident men. Breno Silveira's cinematography makes the most of the varying kinds of light, the sunrises and sunsets, the blistering midday glare, the intimacies of lamplight. With Waddington's help, all of the people involved give us a gently insinuating folk tale.

Under the Sand

François Ozon

21 May 2001

Two films made ten years apart don't precisely constitute a trend, yet in this case the second one almost seems an attempt to take the first one further. In 1991 Anthony Minghella wrote and directed *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, about a blissfully married London couple. The husband dies, and the wife is simply unable to accept the fact. The husband returns from time to time—not a ghost, the husband. Explanations are not offered. The two roles were so movingly played by Juliet Stevenson and Alan Rickman that the film had no trace of spookiness. It seemed to be, calmly and credibly, about a love stronger than death.

Now the French director François Ozon presents *Under the Sand*, which he wrote with three collaborators, and which is about another wife who cannot accept the death of her husband. Ozon's previous film, *Water Drops on Burning Rocks*, adapted from an early Fassbinder play about homosexuality, was somewhat mannered, and proud of its mannerisms. All that flummery is gone now: Ozon no longer needs to prove that he knows cinema. This film's reticence and empathy quickly induce our belief—not that the story is true, but that the wife, without lunacy or hallucination, believes it.

Lovely, poignant confirmation comes from Charlotte Rampling, who plays the wife. (English-born, she is bilingual and has been in several French films.) I never thought I'd be using terms like that about Rampling. I saw her first in *The Night Porter* (1974) as a Viennese woman who recognizes a porter in a hotel as a former SS officer. He tortured her in a prison camp, and she now seeks him out as a sadistic lover to continue the torture. Rampling's subsequent roles, those that I have seen, didn't do much to lift her out of the bizarrerie department until Sidney Lumet's *The Verdict*, in which she was taciturn and true as a schemer eventually devastated by her scheme. Now, older of course and in fact much more attractive, Rampling creates a woman who is clearly intelligent and sophisticated, and yet who, without any awareness of oddity, continues to live with her dead husband.

The woman is English, is married to a Frenchman, and is living in Paris. One summer day she and her husband are on a beach, more or less alone. She sleeps in the sun while he goes for a swim. She wakes to find that he has not returned. Police and helicopters search for him—in vain.

The first clue to the wife's oddity is that she does not become frantic or hysterical. She persists in the search, and she keeps in touch with the officials after her return to Paris, but she lives her life as if her husband were still around. She talks to friends about expecting him back from a trip and how she is preparing things for him. The friends, after exchanging glances, pursue a course they have apparently chosen: they do not contradict her. For her part, she sees her husband—not a specter, but her husband, whom we see, too—as he moves occasionally through her life.

She does miss sexual contact, and she begins an affair with a man of about her age. Once, when they are in bed, she glances up and sees her husband peering through the doorway. It doesn't disturb her: she acts as if she expected him to understand, which he does.

The mystery persists. The situation is never “solved.” At the end, when she returns one day to the beach where her husband disappeared, the mystery is quite deliberately left mysterious. But *Under the Sand*, like *Truly, Madly, Deeply*, is performed so straightforwardly, so seriously, and its characters are shown to be so intelligent, that it never seems a freakish supernatural tale. As with the English film, our belief in what we see is irrelevant; the woman's belief is what matters. Again, as with the earlier film, this French one invites questions about the nature of love. Every marriage ceremony contains some version of the idea of love “until death do us part.” But if love is all it is cracked up to be, can death kill it? We all know people whom we respect who have loved spouses, lost them, loved again, and married again. Hasn't it made us wonder what love—in thoughtful beings—really is?

Possibly there is some danger in loading the Minghella and Ozon films with more weight than they can bear. But unless we are stirred to these questions by these films, we reduce them to sentimental trickery. Which they are not.

The Road Home

Zhang Yimou

28 May 2001

In 1988, *Red Sorghum* announced the talent of Zhang Yimou to this country. Part of the American reaction was surprise at such expert and humane filmmaking in China, film relatively free of political baggage. The People's Republic had been making almost five hundred feature films a year, but (reportedly) they had been freighted with propaganda. Now a so-called “fifth generation” of artists had arisen in the nationalized film industry, less shackled politically, more cosmopolitan in outlook—they were actually given access to other countries' films.

As far as we could see, no director in this new group was more talented than Zhang Yimou. In time he moved from historical subjects, generally acceptable to the authorities,

into the present era, with some jabs at bureaucracy. *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) was hardly radical, but it did satirize governmental bumbling, and—even more to our point—it did so with finesse and charm. To have seen *Qiu Ju* is to remember it as a breath of fresh air and as a deft comedy.

Zhang's latest will be remembered, too, though for different reasons. *The Road Home* begins with a successful young man, Luo Yusheng, returning from the city where he lives to his native village in the north. His father, Luo Changyu, has died, and his mother, Zhao Di, is grief-stricken. She is weaving the funeral cloth to cover her husband's coffin, and she insists, as tradition dictates, that his coffin be carried by hand, not transported by truck, from the hospital where he died to the village where he lived. (Thus he will never forget the road home.) This tradition is difficult to carry out—it requires manpower and expense, principally—and while the matter is being mooted in the village, the film moves back in time to its major subject, the meeting and wooing and marrying of Luo Changyu and Zhao Di long ago.

Color blooms as we move back: up to then black and white has predominated. Zhao Di is eighteen, living with her widowed mother, from whom the girl obviously got her sense of tradition. To the village comes Luo Changyu, a twenty-year-old teacher, and for the girl it is absolute love at absolute first sight. Her maneuvers to attract his attention (she is not one of his students) are so simple, so undramatic, that to recount them would reduce them to data and strip them of their loveliness and wit. Of course we know in advance that, whatever the delays and the frustrations, matters are going to come out all right. But suspense simply has no place here. Human experience is the point of this screenplay (by Bao Shi), the begetting of lifelong love. At the end of the flashback—which is a great deal more than a flash—we know why the elderly Zhao Di grieves as she does and why she wants her husband to be carried, in ancient style, back to his village so that he will never lose the way to the site of their love.

The coda of the film, in the present again, is a touch too long, and it is the only section where sentiment risks emphasis. (The final glimpse of the young and smiling Zhao Di, for instance, is not needed.) Still, Zhang shows once again, and overwhelmingly, that he is a masterly director. Without postcard prettiness, he lays the beauties of this village and its mountains before us so quietly and proudly that a warrant of nativity, of belonging, suffuses the film. His gifts of elision, of simple yet precise framing, have never been more engaging, and all these matters are admirable before we even get to the acting.

Zhang Ziyi, who was last seen here in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, is irresistible as the young Zhao Di. Her prettiness doesn't need discovering: it is immediately there. Then her tenderness, her pride, and her ache arrive as the story progresses. These revelations about the village girl—and therefore about Zhang Ziyi's talent—are enchanting. Zheng Hao, as the young teacher, strikes exactly the right chord of reticence and probity and susceptibility. Sun Honglei as the grown city-dwelling son in the present and Zhao Yuelin as the elderly Zhao Di, his tearful, stubborn mother, fill out the pattern justly. So knowing is the director, so steeped in the film's sense of antiquity, that the

small role of an itinerant pottery-mender, played by Zhang Zhongxi, evokes the essence of numberless centuries.

Anyone who has seen *The Wind Will Carry Us*, by Abbas Kiarostami, will note a resemblance between the Iranian gem and Zhang's film. In both pictures a city man travels to a remote village and reestablishes contact with the deep currents of his country's being. Zhang revealed in a recent interview how much he admires Kiarostami's talent, including the latter's ability to transcend social and political strictures. "Iran shows us the way forward," Zhang said. How beautifully he follows Kiarostami's example—at the same time that he is very much himself.

Aberdeen

Hans Petter Moland

24 September 2001

Comparisons and pigeonholes are first aids for critics. Examples: "Mr. A's film treats the same theme as Mr. B's, but it doesn't [or does] surpass it." And: "Mr. A's film is one more of the line that began with Mr. B's twenty years ago." What convenient compass points such remarks provide for placing a new work, what apertures for evaluation.

But there are none such for *Aberdeen*. Even though comparisons and genres have been cited in some comments, they don't really register. I cannot think of another film that treats so heatedly the range of emotional possibilities between a young woman and her father. Desperately, I could reach for *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), in which Katharine Hepburn made her screen debut as John Barrymore's daughter; but the father-daughter sentiments in that film, comfortably ensconced in social acceptances, have no relation to the fierce ripping of such sentiments here. Of course *Aberdeen* does not—could not—plumb all aspects of father-daughter possibilities, but what it does treat, it puts through several baths of acid.

The director was Hans Petter Moland, born in Norway and educated in America, who co-wrote the screenplay with Kristin Amundsen. The young woman is named Kaisa; living in London, she is prospering in her job and enjoying her life. (Our first glimpse of her is while she is having sex. It's very much to the point of her character that we never see the man or learn who he is.) She gets a phone call from her mother, Helen, who lives in Aberdeen. Helen asks Kaisa to go to Norway and bring her father—Tomas, a Norwegian—to Aberdeen. Helen and Tomas were never married, but she now hopes for Tomas's rehabilitation, in Aberdeen, from the alcoholism that saddles him. The catalyst for both mother and daughter is Helen's disclosure that she has cancer in an advanced stage. Kaisa agrees to make the trip.

Before the credits, we have seen Kaisa, as a child of about ten, running to greet her father in a rush of feeling. But she hasn't seen him much since those days. She finds him in Norway, unemployed (he has worked on oil rigs), truculent, sodden, but somehow

strong, with the special pathos and irritation of an intelligent man who is a hopeless drunk. She persuades him to come along with her. From her present point of view, he is a stranger, which puts her in a double position: she must deal with a man whom she doesn't know except that she remembers him as her father. Tomas is in an equivalent position, except that his memories of the past are naturally more detailed.

The bulk of the story is their journey from Norway to Aberdeen. (The film, I should note, is in English.) This journey is not placid. Tomas, slyly and otherwise, finds ways to keep drinking. Kaisa soon reveals, when she sniffs to keep her vigor up, a considerable coke habit. The first big hassle in the trip occurs at the Norwegian airport where they are to board a plane for Aberdeen. Tomas is so soused that the receptionist will not let him board. Kaisa explodes with anger, arguing—in vain—her mother's illness. The loud dispute results in their being barred permanently from flying on that airline. The airport fracas is, perversely, a sort of bonding between father and daughter. In the car that Kaisa has rented, she and Tomas drive to a port and board a ship for England. Misadventures persist, on board and after. Anger and remorse, drunkenness and disgust, billow up and subside. Working through the story, quite unstated, is a serpentine sense that Tomas is ashamed to face Helen, and that Kaisa wants to force him to this meeting.

On an English road, headed for Scotland, their car blows a tire, and a truck driver named Clive stops to help and enters the story. In one town some well-dressed thugs attack the (by now) three of them and rob them. In Edinburgh, Kaisa sells one of her packets of coke to finance the rest of the trip. At one point Tomas feels so harassed by her that he tells her he may not even really be her father. (It turns out that years earlier Helen may have in anger said such a thing—untrue.) But the false revelation allows the coked-up and frazzled Kaisa to make a teasing attempt to seduce Tomas in the back of the car as Clive drives. Thus the film uncovers briefly a dark father-daughter secret, a tease about them that has been lurking in the back of our brains.

The deliberate discomfort of that scene, along with the proliferating tantrums and pukings and sleazes and police interventions, makes this journey a scathing pilgrimage for both father and daughter. But they reach Aberdeen. The very last sequence may seem a bit mushy—I note only that it involves a red clown nose that Tomas had given Kaisa as a child, a souvenir that she has kept on her key ring—but it is a move toward the rehabilitation for which Helen had first dispatched Kaisa, and it helps the film to fulfill its title. Aberdeen is more than the city to which the journey moves: it is the site for father and daughter of a cleansing through pain.

At any rate this is the function that the ending intends. For myself, this ending is only a completion for formality's sake, like a brief coda in music. The real being of the film is the journey, the anatomy of tensions between a father and his daughter, each with privacies of escape and fulfillment, each with self-dissatisfactions, both abutted by circumstance and imprisoned by biology. The journey is the film. Neither Kaisa nor Tomas "learns" much from the journey: they harrow their way through it as an episode in their lives. They both know what they have been through but are not transformed except by the increment of experience. The last, soft scene in *Aberdeen* is less a bouquet for the

movie world than a brief respite for Tomas and Kaisa. Candidly—courageously, even—this film is an abrasion of audience expectation. It dares to be itself, like it or not.

The four leading actors are splendid. Charlotte Rampling, recently so fine in the French film *Under the Sand*, plays Helen. We never see her out of her hospital bed, and yet Rampling radiates quiet beauty. (I confess that I don't understand why she doesn't have the Scottish accent that Kaisa has.) Ian Hart gives Clive presence and strength effortlessly. He doesn't come across as consciously macho, but his alert disposition and his resourcefulness make him the person needed in the role. I haven't previously been an enthusiast for Stellan Skarsgård, but one is forced to judge an actor by the roles he gets. Here he has, in more than sheer prominence, a major role; and as the stormy, befuddled, riven Tomas, Skarsgård kept reminding me—the highest compliment I could pay a Scandinavian actor—of Max von Sydow.

A truth about Skarsgård is also true of Lena Headey, who plays Kaisa. Anyone who sees his performance and hers will be unlikely ever to forget either. Headey, lately seen in the undistinguished *Onegin*, plunges into this role with—oxymoron though it is—controlled abandon. Kaisa is a woman who attracts and discomforts and estranges and even amuses us, and not in any neat progressive or regressive sequence. Headey takes on the repellents in the role as well as the emotional stabs, and she is always authentic, never interested in anything but the verity of the moment. It is a star performance in a way that most starring performances avoid: she doesn't seem to give a damn whether we come away liking her or not, so long as we believe her.

The same is true of *Aberdeen* as a whole. Moland clearly conceived of his film as an unsparing descent into two affixed yet warring psyches, and, with an authoritative talent, he has not flinched.

A Beautiful Mind

Ron Howard

28 January 2002

A Beautiful Mind is another attempt to deal with genius and its problems. This time the genius is mathematical, and the problems are not political or social but mental. John Forbes Nash, Jr. did brilliant work at Princeton in the late 1940s, slipped into schizophrenia, struggled recurrently with it, and was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 1994.

But the screenplay by Akiva Goldsman is a glossy example of how a troubled and troublesome life can be sanitized into a Movieland saga. The messy dissonances of Nash's life, sexual and social and otherwise (all publicly available), have been transmuted into a homophonic drama—a protagonist battles an obstacle, with his wife at his side,

and wins through to success. In fact, Nash and his wife were divorced and remarried, and he got the prize for work that he had done years earlier as a young man. When Goldsman was jogged about the omissions and alterations in his script, he said, "This was never a biopic." That is true. But what sort of pic did Goldsman think he was contriving?

We follow Nash through his graduate-school days, then to his employment both as a teacher and as a codebreaker for the U.S. military. He marries and has a child; then the paranoia that brought him to schizophrenia obtrudes past concealment, and we learn that all his secret government work has been his sheer fantastication. (The director, Ron Howard, tampers a bit with this fantasizing: in the military scenes we occasionally glimpse actions behind Nash's back that he couldn't possibly have imagined.) His recovery, such as it is, and his subsequent life, and the Nobel ceremony, conclude matters.

Jennifer Connelly, as his wife, is warm and proud, frightened and brave. Ed Harris, as the nonexistent secret agent who attends Nash constantly, is granitic. Christopher Plummer, as Nash's psychiatrist, is insufficiently used. Nash is played by Russell Crowe, and I am quirky enough to say that, within the bounds of the film, his dilemma as actor is more interesting than Nash's. The latter's agony is confined to the sequences of mental unbalance. Crowe's dilemma is before us for the film's entire 134 minutes.

Crowe is an intelligent and searching actor. Whether he is the careful complainant in *The Insider* or the robustious action hero in *Gladiator*, we feel that he wants to know why he is doing what he does and how he can unify everything into a cogent whole. He certainly applies that intelligence and search to the role of Nash. But one element that Crowe unfortunately does not have, not a dram of it, is charm, appeal, charisma. He is not an intrinsically attractive man, and in an unattractive role the problem is compounded. When Dustin Hoffman played an autistic man in *Rain Man*, when Debra Winger played a mentally impaired woman in *A Dangerous Woman*, they took us with them because, sheerly as theater figures, they compel. Crowe, despite his best efforts, doesn't move us much: he only makes us impatient for the wheels of the story to turn more quickly.

What Time Is It There?

Tsai Ming-liang

4 February 2002

"The sound track invented silence," said Robert Bresson, and some of the best directors in history, including himself, have fixed silence on film. For them, silence is both aural and visual, not merely the absence of talk but the presentation of persons who fill our imaginations with what they are not saying. Such a director is Tsai Ming-liang, the Taiwanese artist already distinguished by qualities of intense concern and cool scrutiny that are encased in quiet. His latest work, *What Time Is It There?*, again dwells in quiet.

Tsai was born in Malaysia in 1957 and earned a degree in drama and film from the University of Taiwan. For a time he worked in Taiwanese theater and television, and in 1992 he made his first feature film, which he followed with four more. I have seen only *The River* (1996), but with that and with some reading about him, it becomes clear that his latest work is deeply rooted.

As the title foretells, this film is concerned with time and space and the relation between them. Tsai's courage in addressing these concepts, all of them often enwrapped in silence, is matched by the simplicity, the audacious respect, of his address. The story of this film, in the screenplay written by the director and Yang Pi-ying, is not in itself a drama or a sequence of character explorations: it is not much more than a sequence of events in which the three concepts that absorb Tsai can unfold. If the contrast between the film's huge subjects and its structural spareness suggests the existential absurd, that seems to be what Tsai is seeking.

Mimicking his disregard for convention, I begin with the last scene of the film. It is set in Paris. One morning a young Taiwanese woman, Shiang-chyi, is sitting silently by a lake in a park, apparently collecting her thoughts. A suitcase floats by on the lake. The camera leaves Shiang and follows the suitcase. An elderly man farther down the edge of the lake, who has no connection to her, hooks the suitcase with his umbrella and brings it ashore. He leaves it there and walks away. The film ends. The fact that the young woman has just come from an unexpected one-night (lesbian) encounter; the fact that a few minutes earlier we saw a hooker in far-off Taipei rob a young man of his suitcase, a young man whom Shiang once met—these facts resonate in this last scene, both as Shiang's effort to understand herself and as the director's soft mockery of neat plot parallels. It is a scene that the master minimalist Ozu might have relished.

Comparable sequences form the body of the film. In the opening scene, a middle-aged man smokes a cigarette in his home, then sits down to a meal. We assume that he is a character whom we are to follow, but we never see him again. We soon learn that he has died, because his widow is frantically trying to get his spirit to revisit her. These two are the parents of the young man who is later robbed by the hooker. His name is Hsiao Kang, and the film's only noisy scenes are those between him and his mother as he tries to stop her silly efforts to invite her dead husband's return.

Hsiao is a watch peddler in the Taipei streets. Shiang is a young woman on her way to Paris for a holiday. En route to the airport she tries to buy a watch from him, the one he is wearing. He declines. Ultimately she convinces him and, with the watch, goes off on her trip. This is the only time they meet, and she never refers to him again. He becomes obsessed with re-setting every watch and clock he sees to Paris time, but there is no sense of lorn love in him, just a heightened awareness of all the world he does not know. The lightness of the young couple's encounter, the fact that it does not lead to any mystical union, is essential to Tsai's design. He wants to show that an immersion in his three elements does not depend on drama or even on narrative. We simply follow the lives of two people who met for a moment and are now thousands of miles apart.

If we have any reservations about the film's gravity or the director's courage in

disregarding almost everything that holds most pictures together, they are calmed by the very look of this film. (Benoit Delhomme is the empathic cinematographer.) Most of the interiors are in confined space, compositions full of interest and ease, with spare side-lighting as part of the composition. A place is revealed, and that place itself is sometimes the sum of everything that happens in the scene. The camera almost never moves. There is never a panning shot. (Bresson said that “one should not use the camera as if it were a broom.”)

In a scene near the end, Shiang is standing in a Paris cemetery looking at a reclining sculpted figure on a grave. Nothing happens—except what we know is happening within her, some contemplation of who and why she is. In her next scene she sits on a bench outside the cemetery. An older man is on the other end of the bench, and sensing her loneliness, he strikes up a terse yet friendly conversation with her—in English. Then he scribbles on a piece of paper and hands it to her. It is his telephone number. End of scene. This nameless man is played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, who, when he was young, was Antoine Doinel in five Truffaut films. The reminder of Truffaut is apt, because Tsai’s very first scene with the character who is never seen again is reminiscent of Truffaut. But those who do not know Léaud or Truffaut are not bypassed: for anyone, the bench scene is odd and true.

As is sometimes the case, this description of *What Time Is It There?* is hazardous, because it may sound as if samples were being offered of a linear, cumulative story. But this picture consists only of moments in which things happen, visible or invisible. Two lives brush briefly, then continue on their own. Conventional design is not the point: the currents of existence take over. We are drenched in the mere passage of time—the film’s one hundred sixteen minutes are part of what it is about. (The “there” in the title, it seems worth noting, might also be in the widow’s mind about her husband: she and he are more certainly separated than her son and the young woman.) We are teased with the thought of what might possibly have happened with this young pair. (Indeed, the son’s anger at his mother’s attempts to reach her dead husband may be a refraction of his own separation from the young woman.) And throughout the film silence recurs, paradoxically like the refrain of a ballad.

Tsai is well-served by his principal actors, Lu Yi-ching as the distraught widow, Lee Kang-sheng as her shadowed son, Chen Shiang-chyi as the young woman who seems to feed on every moment of her life. All of them have worked with Tsai before and have in some measure become his instruments and collaborators, as Bergman’s actors did.

As with some Bergman films and with numerous artworks in the last two centuries, Tsai’s film does not strain to invite us in. It declares itself early as eccentric, luring us only with its fine formalities. Neither does it ultimately satisfy in the way that concentric films, including many masterworks, nourish us. It promises the unusual, and keeps its promise: we move and wonder like explorers in a large echoing cavern where Tsai’s three elements abide.

The Son's Room

Nanni Moretti

25 February 2002

The Italian filmmaker Nanni Moretti has had a schismatic career. Almost unknown in America, he is a critical and public darling in Europe, a winner of festival prizes. Because he writes and directs and stars in his films and because his roles are generally quiet and thoughtful, and sometimes thoughtfully comic, he has been compared to Woody Allen. (No physical resemblance: Moretti is tall, slim, bearded, good-looking.) This is to compare George Gershwin with Stephen Sondheim simply because each wrote smart songs about contemporary life. For all the comic touches, Moretti's work is predominantly and uniquely serious. His continuing subject, in modes much deeper than Allen's occasional such forays, is himself.

Moretti began making films in 1973, when he was twenty; five years later he made *Ecce Bombo*, considered by many the prime European picture of its time about people of his age. It was a big success abroad, yet to my knowledge it was not released here. The first Moretti film to arrive was *The Mass Is Ended*, in 1985, which was sandbagged by New York critics. Therefore—a grim therefore—it had few further American showings. For me, it is an important work. Moretti plays a priest in his early thirties, again just about his own age, who is transferred from a country church to his native city, Rome. Now he is a cleric amidst the people with whom he had gone to school and alongside his own troubled family. Burning with faith and with the knowledge that this very faith is dividing him from his family and his friends who do not share that faith so fully, the priest collides with the difficulties of religion in our day that were apparently troubling Moretti himself.

Palombella Rossa (1989) was about the problems of a politically radical water-polo player. (Moretti was once on a national water-polo team.) In *Caro Diario* (1994), he actually appeared as himself, in a three-part film that dealt with his problems as a director and with a treatment for cancer that he underwent—successfully. I emphasize that the three Moretti films seen in this country are only a skim of his eighteen features and shorts.

Now comes the nineteenth, *The Son's Room*. Sensitively directed and engagingly cast, it continues Moretti's fictional/true autobiography. (Like the protagonist, Moretti is now a father. Heaven forbid that he ever undergo what his character undergoes, but he is now well able to imagine it.) The setting is Ancona, a small city on the Adriatic. Moretti plays a psychoanalyst named Giovanni (which is his own real first name), who has a busy practice, a wife, and a teenage son and daughter—a warm, closely knit family. For almost half of the film, we simply follow their lives. We know, because we are all well-trained filmgoers, that something disruptive is bound to happen, but, unlike ordinary movie carpenters, Moretti does not heavy-handedly set up cozy goodies in a row, patently predicting that they are going to be knocked down. Instead, he takes us along with the dailiness of living—interesting because of the truth of the people.

Something else holds us, even, I think, if this is one's first time with Moretti. He presents a duality. He is quite credibly Giovanni, but, as he has been before, he is also Moretti, using the character as a way of exploring himself and the world. There is a very subtle touch of Brecht in this process, without any Brechtian contest between presentation and representation. Moretti seems to be savoring the film, learning as much about it as we do while it goes along. Admittedly, this procedure lowers the emotional tone of his acting, but this is redressed by an appealing flavor—performance plus thoughtfulness.

The expected disruption occurs, terribly. The son is drowned in a diving accident. The impact of the horror is all the more grueling because Moretti and his wife and daughter are people, not film characters with big scenes. The boy's room is left untouched, almost as a means of maintaining his presence. A further stab comes with a letter to the son from a girl unknown to the family, who met the son for just one day and writes to him in the hope that they will meet again. This touch is justified, and in an odd way verified, because a few months after the accident she visits the family, not disconsolate but with another boy with whom she is hitchhiking to France.

This leads to a conclusion that, with gentle clarity, completes the film. The analyst and wife and daughter drive the hitchhikers to a place where they can more easily hitch a ride, but when they get there the hitchhikers are asleep in the back and Giovanni does not want to wake them. So they all drive all night to the west coast, where the traveling pair can get a bus for France. After the bus leaves, Giovanni and his wife suddenly trickle into laughter. The daughter, puzzled, asks them why they are laughing. They do not reply: they just keep on laughing. But we know why. They have learned that life is irresistibly, almost brutally, continuous. The hitchhiking girl has recovered from her attraction to their son and has found another boy. Giovanni and his wife have found, through this unintended all-night drive to the Ligurian sea, that they are still responsive to affection and hope. The death of their son has begun to become a fact of their lives that they will carry with them; but they will carry it with them, not halt. So they are laughing, bereaved yet at least partially liberated. We are left wondering whether, when they return home, they will keep the son's room as it was.

We can also wonder whether *The Son's Room* will raise Moretti's American status to something like his European level. As the phrase goes, it is to be hoped.

The Piano Teacher

Michael Haneke

15 April 2002

Isabelle Huppert's new film is set in Vienna, though all of the cast are French and speak their own language. This sort of contradiction, common in American-made pictures, is more noticeable in foreign films. The screenplay is based on a novel by an Austrian, who apparently wanted to keep the film version in Vienna, so the contradic-

tion was inevitable, because the director would not make the picture without Huppert. Yet this difference in language is the least of the work's anomalies. Huppert plays Erika Kohut, a fortyish piano teacher at a staid conservatory. She is distinguished in her work, lofty in her standards, strict. Yet in the course of the story we see her do these things:

She visits a porno shop and in a viewing room watches a split screen
showing four explicit sexual acts;

She sniffs tissues left there by the previous (male) occupant;

In her bathroom, she reaches under her nightgown with a razor blade and
incises herself so that she bleeds;

She grapples sexually with a male student of hers in a toilet, then tells him
that she will write a list of demands that he must follow if they are to
have sex;

She prowls around a drive-in theater, discovers a couple copulating in a car,
and squats next to the car to urinate in excitement;

One night she suddenly leaps incestuously on her mother in the bed they
have long shared.

There is more of this general kind.

The film is *The Piano Teacher*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Festival last year. I have placed some of the oddities at the start so that there would be no need, after suggesting the picture's considerable worth, to clear the figurative throat and concede those oddities. It is more helpful, I think, to examine the film in this strange light.

The strangeness is fixed early by Huppert herself. The director, Michael Haneke, was right to insist on her for the role. Sexy iciness has been Huppert's forte ever since *The Lacemaker* (1977), but here it is more than an actor's specialty. It is a temperament essential to the character, all the more so because of the sorts of actions that often erupt through it. This is no facile Jekyll-and-Hyde portrait, two persons in one body: Erika is one person, whole. All her actions are hers, consciously and—though she is usually discreet—unashamedly.

Haneke adapted the screenplay from a novel published by the eminent Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek in 1983. (In 1998 she was awarded the Büchner Prize, the highest German-language literary award.) I have seen two previous films by the German-born Haneke, *Code Unknown* and *Funny Games*, the second of which was signally cruel. As *The Piano Teacher* began to unfold, I thought it was going to be another Haneke special, but the new film is in all senses so much more complex that it almost seems as if Haneke

had been honing his characteristics in order to use them for more than shock, to delve into the seriously dark and discomfiting.

Jelinek's book treats a Vienna that is stuffy in its Mozart-Schubert pride but is roiling underneath. The piano teacher truly believes in classical artistic ideals, yet she is crammed with private hungers. This contrast is of course not exclusive to *alt Wien*: it is part of the discontents of civilization that were explored by an earlier Viennese. But for Erika the term "discontent" is too mild. Her taciturn *agon* is so keen that it appears almost to produce a kind of resentment at being alive—a hatred of having to go through all the troubles of living, and a compensation for the bother with secret malice and sexual seethings.

Haneke's directing style is cognate with Jelinek's prose. Here is the book's opening (in an English translation by Joachim Neugroschel):

The piano teacher, Erika Kohut, bursts like a whirlwind into the apartment she shares with her mother. Mama likes calling Erika her little whirlwind, for the child can be an absolute speed demon. She is trying to escape her mother.

This plainness, one sentence plunked down after another, is thus quickly revealed as a transparent disguise for much that curls and swirls beneath.

Haneke, too, begins with that scene. Erika has come home from the conservatory three hours late. Mother and daughter quarrel over the lateness and about the dress that Erika bought in those three hours. Haneke puts this quarrel in such a bald, vulgar manner that, since it takes place between a mature woman and her elderly mother, it suggests the strange state of emotional matters in this house. Something out of the ordinary is lurking here. Then the film slides forward, probing into the most secret of fantasies, realizing them—in Jelinek coolness—without exclamation.

In that first scene Huppert herself promises us a woman whose surface is both true and a mask, a promise that she fulfills stunningly. As her mother, Annie Girardot, so deservedly loved in so many films, is here enclosed and mean, strategic yet vulnerable. Benoît Magimel, as the hulking student who is also a scientist and an athlete, is accomplished in more than virility.

There is much music, of course, which is managed so cleverly that Huppert and Magimel convince as pianists. One of Haneke's stylistic devices is an analogue to music. Sometimes he holds the camera for a moment on a setting after or before a character leaves or enters. It is like a rest in a score, emphasizing what precedes or follows. A grateful bow to Christian Berger, whose camera distills several centuries in some of the conservatory shots and, in other places, catches the present tense—or a tense present. All those involved have created a film whose blistering candor will linger.

13 *Conversations About One Thing*

Jill Sprecher

17 June 2002

The title of Jill Sprecher's film *13 Conversations About One Thing* presumably bounces off the title of Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird," and, in seriousness at least, the film has a claim to that bounce. Stevens, in thirteen stanzas, describes how the simple act of looking at that bird can be multifold, subject to differing sensibilities. Sprecher, who wrote the screenplay of her film with her sister Karen, has a differing aim: she wants to show us a circumstance of life that touches or buffets us all. A further interesting difference: though Stevens is not schoolmasterly specific, it is much easier to infer his theme than Sprecher's "one thing." Oddly enough, this makes the film tantalizing.

Sprecher strengthens her intent by, I'd say, turning from literary impetus to music. *13 Conversations* was conceived in a certain key, which is maintained throughout, with sufficient variation to forestall monotony yet with enough fidelity to keep the film whole. The best music, it seems to this listener, is conceived in key: the composer does not dream up themes and then speculate about the key. (Place the opening of Mozart's Symphony no. 40 in a key other than G minor—something that a musician once showed me on a piano—and it becomes something else.) The basis of the art in Sprecher's film is that from the start she knew the tone, the scale of acting, the timbre of dialogue—the key—that the film needed in order to be itself.

Her success is all the more striking because her materials are, quite deliberately, common. Mozart's symphony has themes that seem too miraculous to have been conceived by a human being, but Sprecher's materials are out of the subway and the hotel room and the business office. Yet she treats them as if she were composing chamber music, transmuting their diurnality into woodwind quintessences. (As if to support this impression, the score by Alex Wurman uses relatively few instruments: it is lyric, flowing, almost tinkly at times.)

The screenplay is divided into sections—thirteen, I suppose, though I lost count—each of which is preceded by a caption. Most of these captions are quotations from dialogue that we have already heard. This process not only helps to weave the episodes into a fabric, it also underscores the fact that past and present are maneuverable here. Sometimes we approach, from another angle, an event that has already happened; sometimes we return to something in the past that is now treated as the present.

What helps the quietly abstract quality of this realistic film is that all the characters are living lives in ways that seem mundane but conceal tensions. The place is New York. Alan Arkin, a minor official at a business giant, has personal difficulties with his small staff and with his druggie son. Matthew McConaughey, a rising assistant district attorney, gets involved in a car accident and hides his involvement. John Turturro, a married professor seemingly in a clockwork life, is having an affair with another professor. (Barbara Sukowa, the marvel of such German films as *Rosa Luxemburg* and *Marianne*

and *Juliane*, is briefly seen as his lover.) They and others are forced to ponder their lives deeply while they keep living them. And all of the actors, with Sprecher's guidance, play like a chamber ensemble, understanding the "sound" and texture of the whole work.

What is the "one thing" about which they are all fundamentally conversing? Sprecher is careful not to italicize, though she provides chances to speculate. Love? Luck? Irreversibility (the theme of one of the professor's lectures)? My own choice would be the idea—now almost quaint—of design. We can all remember when belief in the design of life was regnant; we all know some who still believe in it, some who disbelieve, and some who disbelieve but feel cheated by their disbelief. This querying of design has an intrinsic irony in art. Beckett wrote plays about nullity, but his beautiful plays are not null. Sprecher's film questioning the credibility of design is itself delicately designed.

The Sprecher sisters deserve special appreciation for the dialogue here. It is never high-flown: it is well-modeled, unhusked, stained with the lives that produced it. The Sprechers have made one previous film, *Clockwatchers* (1997), which I missed but which has been described as a dark comedy about the secret hellish life of office workers. *13 Conversations* is the product of artists rooted in and growing from such concerns.

The Hours

Stephen Daldry

27 January 2003

Suicide in an artwork is almost always a good investment. It virtually guarantees that, whatever the ultimate view of the work, it will be taken seriously. *The Hours*, like the Michael Cunningham novel that is its base, is considerably helped by that investment. Three suicide attempts, two of them successful, provide the atmosphere of the film. Life is attended throughout by the possibility of exit, and, paradoxically enough, this imminence of death gives the story its pulse.

Cunningham's novel is a suite of variations on the fiction and the facts of Virginia Woolf, in both of which suicide looms. The novel in point is *Mrs. Dalloway*, the working title of which was *The Hours*, and in that book an unbalanced war veteran opts out. Woolf herself ended in the River Ouse, her pockets stuffed with rocks. The screen adaptation of Cunningham was done by the English playwright and filmmaker David Hare, whose best picture, *Wetherby*, is itself built on the shock of a suicide. The director was Stephen Daldry—no previous work about suicide that I know, but here he keeps the ambience close, confidential, as if secrets were in the air.

Three women are the chief subjects: Woolf herself, especially on her last day; Clarissa Vaughan, a modern New York editor; and Laura Brown, who is first seen as a Los Angeles housewife in 1951 and is subsequently seen today. Clarissa of course shares her first name with Mrs. Dalloway, but outside of the fact that she is giving a party and buying the flowers herself, this Clarissa is unconnected with Woolf's novel. Laura is

reading the novel in 1951, but there is no hint that the suicide in the book has anything to do with her own temptation. The oddity of Cunningham's work, made even more striking in the film, is that Woolf's own death is much more important to the atmosphere than is her novel. It's the stone-stuffed pockets that are essential, not *Mrs. Dalloway*.

The party that today's Clarissa is giving at her Greenwich Village home is to celebrate a poetry prize that her ex-lover, Richard, has just received. (She and he, affectionate still, have gone their homosexual ways.) Richard, who lives nearby, is far along in the agony of AIDS. Clarissa's intended party is not a silly attempt to cheer him up: it is to help verify his existence. Richard, however, has an escape hatch in the back of his aching head.

Laura, in 1951, is closer to Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway than is the modern Clarissa of New York. Laura has an adoring husband, a child, reasonable comfort. Yet one day she leaves her boy with a neighbor, takes a purse full of pills and a copy of Woolf's book to a hotel room, lies down, bares her pregnant belly, and considers her pills. She does not take them. As we learn, she undergoes a different change, which is eventually revealed through the fate of her son. That son is the poet, Richard. The three strands of the story, seemingly disparate, finally integrate.

The ailing Richard is played by Ed Harris with bitter ferocity. (It is he who illuminates the title. When Clarissa tells the racked man that he doesn't have to come to the party if he doesn't want to, he makes the Beckettian reply: "But there are still the hours, aren't there? One and then another, and you get through that one and then, my god, there's another." He escapes the infinitude of time by the same means as the veteran in Woolf's novel.) Meryl Streep, who plays Clarissa, suggests the pitch of the hectic life in which this woman lives, within which she struggles to remain herself. Julianne Moore, as Laura, meets the prime difficulty of her role: in the hotel room, this cake-baking housewife reveals a despair that has been well hidden. As Woolf, Nicole Kidman has an easier time of it: nothing needs to be revealed, all is painfully apparent. Kidman needs only to do what she is given to do, which she accomplishes thoughtfully enough.

But the film lives in an adduced gravity. Woolf's finish, affecting just because it is Woolf's finish, is used to aggrandize the two other stories. Her suicide in 1941 has nothing to do with Clarissa or even with Richard's fate. (His trouble is physical, not mental.) Laura is somewhat more a refraction of Woolf, but her drama and Richard's, too, rely almost impertinently on Woolf herself. Cunningham's novel was helped by his prose, which curves gracefully in the historical present to unify the book in some degree. Stripped of that tegument, the film depends more blatantly on Woolf's fate to give it organism and depth.

The Pianist

Roman Polanski

27 January 2003

With *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski pays his dues. Born in Krakow in 1933, he escaped from the ghetto when he was eight and spent the war years in various phases of flight. His childhood experience has often been considered in relation to the quite different themes of his films, but at last he has chosen a subject right from the heart of that experience.

The screenplay derives, in Ronald Harwood's adaptation, from the autobiography of Władysław Szpilman, a Polish-Jewish pianist who had found some success before the war. He, his parents, and his siblings undergo the harassments and sufferings of German oppression, and it is only because he is able-bodied enough for the work force that he avoids the concentration-camp fate of his family. After numerous hazards, all dreadful, his life is saved at the end by his music. Shortly before the arrival of the Soviet army, a German captain discovers Szpilman in hiding, finds out that he is a pianist, and asks him to play. The captain apparently enjoys the irony of saving a Jew because of his musical ability. The Soviets soon cap the irony.

Polanski has never directed better. Life in the Warsaw ghetto under the Germans is put before us with a kind of terrible patience. As Szpilman, Adrien Brody endures his fate with doggedness rather than heroism. Scene after scene, image after image, chills the viewer's blood. One shot I'll never forget: the ragged Szpilman walks toward us from the middle distance, down a wide, absolutely devastated, otherwise empty street. It is more than a picture; it is an epitome.

But *The Pianist* propounds a now-familiar dilemma. Shall there be a continual flow of films on this subject? Should there be continual reminders? Or have the images been sufficiently burned into our brains? Isn't there a risk of a Holocaust genre? In short, is *The Pianist* needed? To name only one of its predecessors—for me, the towering one—doesn't *Schindler's List* do everything that Polanski achieves and more? Particularly in light of his personal history, plus the art of his rendition, it seems almost treacherous to note that this film is belated in the film world.

The Son

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

3 February 2003

When Emile Zola published the dramatization of his novel *Thérèse Raquin* in 1873, he included a preface that is a landmark in the history of naturalism. In it he said that his intent was to show “the banality of everyday life behind the excruciating agonies of my chief protagonists.” The Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne may

never have read this preface (though it would be no surprise if they knew it), but in their films they have been progressing steadily toward Zolaesque naturalism.

Now in their fifties, these brothers spent many years making documentaries for Belgian and French television. In 1996 they made their first fiction feature, *La Promesse*, about a grubby youth in an industrial city and his encounter with the primal honor of an African woman, a film that is surely a quiet, hushed place in the memory of everyone who saw it. Working-class life was only to a degree the true subject. In their next feature, *Rosetta* (1999), the crush of that life had a larger part as a teenage girl struggled to remain uncrushed. Now comes *The Son*, in which the milieu—the workaday life of a carpenter who teaches carpentry—is the core. This shape seems pure Zola. Everyday working life, says the film, is where most of the world's drama takes place.

I saw *The Son* at the New York Film Festival last fall and have now seen it again, and both times I felt that I was in the presence of a work that is larger and more deeply roiling than we are usually prepared for in a film. Part of the enlarging, almost frightening ultimate effect of the film comes from the Zolaesque banalities with which it begins. First we hear a saw. (There is never any music.) Then come some hammering and other shop noises as we enter the world of Olivier, a skilled carpenter in his thirties, who is moving around a shop attending to the work of teenage boys. Most of the movement in this sequence—in almost all of the sequences—is shot with a handheld camera, which to the Dardennes seems an adjunct of naturalism. Thus, in much of the beginning we are following Olivier, not accompanying him. We see his face sometimes, but as he moves around we see mostly the back of his head. Before the film is five minutes old, the handheld camera weaves us into the patterns of Olivier's life. We get some idea of his skills and standards and also of his good feeling toward these boys. Very soon we learn that this is a government center; these boys are out of juvenile prisons and are being taught a useful trade.

We learn more. Olivier's ex-wife visits, tells him that she is re-marrying, and asks whether he has met anyone. No, he says. It seems that their divorce came about because of emotional shock: their very young son was murdered, and the blow somehow split this couple.

The film progresses. The saws continue to whine, the hammers to tap. Another sixteen-year-old boy, Francis, arrives after a five-year prison term. Soon Olivier realizes that this is the boy who killed his son. Olivier, who is not chatty in any case, does not tell Francis that he is the child's father. He isn't sure why he doesn't tell the boy or why he agrees to work with him. When his ex-wife discovers that he is working with their child's murderer, she faints in his arms. Then she asks him why he is doing this. He replies, with an aching, persistent bewilderment, "I don't know."

In the course of his daily work with Francis, Olivier asks the youth why he was sent to prison. For stealing a radio from a car, says Francis. But after he started the theft, he saw that there was a baby in the car who began to cry, and Francis had to silence him. Through this account, as through all their work together, Olivier reveals nothing by

word or look. He just keeps working. When he is alone, however, unspoken questions tear at him.

Olivier asks Francis to accompany him one Sunday to a lumberyard that Olivier's brother owns. Other boys have made this trip: it is a chance to learn something about wood. In this deserted lumberyard, as the two of them select planks and load them on a trailer behind a pickup truck, Olivier tells Francis what he knows about the crime. Perhaps Olivier planned to tell him, perhaps not; their isolation here seems to make the facts burst forth. Francis panics. Fearing that Olivier will seek revenge in this lonely place, he scampers over the piles of planks. Olivier chases him, shouting after him that it will be all right. Francis breaks out of the yard into the woods. Olivier catches him and subdues him, at last with his hands around the boy's throat. He is in the same position that Francis was in with the baby. The shock of this fact stops Olivier—who did not mean to harm Francis anyway. He gets up. Because Olivier releases him, Francis is calmed. He goes back to the lumberyard with Olivier. They again load planks on the trailer. Working life continues. The film stops. It does not end. It stops.

I have sketched more details than usual because reticent hints could not do justice to this starkly sculptured story and because, as I found on my second viewing, prior knowledge can only enhance the power of the film. *The Son* does not depend on plot twists. The fulfillment is all, especially in the performances. Olivier is played by Olivier Gourmet, who was in the first two Dardenne films: as the boy's crafty, exploiting father in *La Promesse* and as the girl's boss in *Rosetta*. If there is such a person as a perfect Zola actor, it is Gourmet. He could not have a less distinguished face—doughy and bespectacled—but his physical force, his concentration, assure us that a manifold person is lurking within the (seeming) non-actor. When, for instance, he chases Francis around the lumberyard, the sheer physicality of his chase, seeking to reassure the boy, expresses what the man could not verbalize.

The more surprising performance comes from Morgan Marinne as Francis. The directors clearly led him to understand that Francis had prepared a state of mind for himself. He had stolen a radio, and, only incidentally, he had killed a baby. In any case he had "paid" (his word) with a five-year prison term. The directors also helped Marinne to deal with the shattering of Francis's state of mind when he finds that he is working with the baby's father. For the relatively inexperienced Marinne to have dealt so well with these subtleties required, besides good directing, a native quickness.

The press material for this film contains some notes made by the Dardenne brothers during the shooting. Such material is usually disposable, but these notes are germane. On November 23, 2001, they say that Olivier "is probably right when he responds, 'I don't know.' We don't know, either." The immensity of the forces that are in Olivier, previously unsuspected and now revealed, is precisely this film's subject. (Is that Tolstoy glimmering in the distance?) The ability to conceive a compact drama on this huge subject and to embody it as perfectly as they have done, added to what they have already accomplished, puts Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne among the premier film artists of our time.

A last quotation from their notes. “April 4, 2002. The film is called ‘The Son.’ It could have been called ‘The Father.’” Yes.

People I Know

Dan Algrant

19 May 2003

Al Pacino’s latest film, *People I Know*, is suffering from fuzzy description. Because Pacino plays a harried New York press agent, much of the comment I’ve seen has called the picture a descendant of *Sweet Smell of Success*. (That film, in fact, is no more about a press agent than it is about a Broadway gossip columnist, a nearly extinct breed, and is streaked with several kinds of sentiment.) *People I Know* is indeed about a hustling, pill-popping press agent, and the swamp through which he paddles is celebrity-mongering, but that is not the film’s true subject.

Eli Wurman, played by Pacino, has lived through one era into another. On the walls of his office are framed letters and photos from the Kennedy time, and he boasts that he once marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. As he also hints occasionally, he knows that he is now in a quite different age. He apparently was what used to be called a showbiz liberal, but such people, whatever our questions about them, are now less vivid and iconic in our Ashcroft-tinted age. The basic brilliant stroke in this screenplay by Jon Robin Baitz is that his protagonist is not a lofty statesman or a social activist but a mingy press agent, sharp and quick, who knows that once upon a time he used his shenanigans in the service of worthy causes. Eli also knows that aesthetically, perhaps even ethically, his antics were no better back then than they are now, but at least then he could use them in the service of progressive ideas. Baitz’s choice of this publicist as protagonist shows how far down the sense of era change has seeped.

Eli underscores this change by trying to recapture the past. He has organized a benefit at a popular restaurant to help improve racial relations. Two hundred of the most important people in New York have been invited—importance is undefined—and the two principal speakers are to be a flamboyant black minister and a wealthy Jew much concerned with Jewish causes. (We are free to infer the models for these men.) These two are smarmily introduced, after their behind-the-scenes squabble, by an Oscar-winning actor who is now sniffing at political ambition. (Because of this ambition, the actor has just fired Eli, who was his publicist and whom he now considers too scruffy.)

The film takes place within twenty-four hours. This benefit party, with its arrangements, is the core of the action, but around it are wound two subplots. The actor has been involved with a drug-addicted film starlet and model, Jilli, who has been jailed: he asks Eli to bail her out, help her to pack, and get her out of town. In her hotel suite Eli is so buzzed with pills and drink that he isn’t even aware that she is being murdered in the next room. (He later learns that she had taken incriminating photos at an orgy.) Thus

he himself is entangled. Then the widow of Eli's brother comes up to New York from Virginia ostensibly just to visit, but, in quite genuine affection, she hopes that Eli will come back with her. She is played by Kim Basinger, tenderly convincing in this woman's pity for the life that Eli lives and in her longing for him. This strand, like the Jilli story, is deliberately left unfinished by the film's final dealings with Eli.

People I Know was directed by Dan Algrant, apparently a Manhattan specialist: he did *Naked in New York* and has worked on the television series "Sex and the City." He keeps the film wriggling along, snaking through the undergrowth of its subject. The cinematographer was Peter Deming, who shot the nearly surreal *Mulholland Drive* and who here makes New York look theatrical. But the very considerable impact of the picture is mainly the work of two men, the author and the star.

Baitz is a well-known playwright of whose work I have seen only a little. His writing was adroit, and he chose interesting subjects that he had not quite mastered. Here his writing is again adroit—pungent and insightful. Short lines strike sparks: in Jilli's hotel she asks Eli if he wants sex, and woozily he says that he prefers things more romantic. She says: "I can do romantic." Those four words implicate her whole life. (The pair don't have sex.) As for Baitz's subject, he has quite mastered it here and has placed it shrewdly by keeping it underneath as an ostinato instead of a leading theme. And Baitz has written a role for Pacino that must have seemed to him a feast waiting to be devoured.

Pacino has never been a perfunctory actor, but he has often conveyed that he knew he was playing a movie role and wanted us to enjoy it for what it was. Sometimes, however, he has found a full-bodied character that summoned all the energy and technique and sheer force of concentration that are always in him waiting for the right chance—as in *Dog Day Afternoon* and *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Donnie Brasco*. Eli Wurman is another such chance, a complex character whom Pacino plays in counterpoint, the hustler whom everyone sees and the mourner of the past who is taciturn but always present.

Friday Night

Claire Denis

21 July 2003

Coincidence. Like *Jet Lag*, reviewed last week, *Friday Night* is French, is set in Paris during a strike, and is almost exclusively about two people, a mature man and woman. But otherwise the films are quite different. *Jet Lag* is comic, built on a series of plot developments. *Friday Night* is serious and, though it certainly moves forward, is chiefly concerned with character, with self-discovery.

Claire Denis, the director, who is best known here for *Chocolat* and *Beau Travail*, adapted the screenplay from a novel by Emmanuele Bernheim with Bernheim's help. The story is so simple that it bespeaks intelligence in the director. No one would make

this film who was not less focused on sizzle than on secrets, in this case a woman's complexity. More, the director had to have a kind of loving confidence in the actress who would play the role. Of course Denis also had to have confidence in the texture that the man would bring to the film, but he is not equally explored.

As the title promises, it all takes place in one evening. Laure, a woman in her thirties, is packing her things in her apartment because the next day she is moving in with her boyfriend. She puts some of the cartons in the rear seat of her car and sets off to have dinner with friends. What she hasn't remembered is that a public transport strike is on: the streets are strangled with stalled cars. This is surely the most horrendous such traffic jam on screen since Godard's *Weekend*, and similarly the jam affects much more than immediate plans.

Laure's car radio enjoins drivers to give lifts to pedestrians, and after turning down one man, she admits another to her car. He seems a few years older than she is, and he is quiet. They hardly converse. (This is true throughout the film.) They sit and wait. Very slowly, the car moves on. He smokes. (A chief difference between American and foreign films these days is cigarettes.) A restrained intimacy develops between them simply because of circumstances. At last she tells him her name. His, he says, is Jean. This is absolutely all that she ever learns factually about him.

She finds a moment to leave the car and telephone to cancel her dinner date. Still traffic-jammed, she lets her temper fray after a bit, and Jean says he had better get out. He does. She is sorry, leaves the immobilized car, and finds him in a cafe. They have a coffee. He asks the bartender for change, some ten-franc coins, and goes into the toilet. She assumes that he wants to make a phone call, but when she later goes in there herself, she sees that the phone accepts only phone cards. Next to it is a vending machine for condoms at ten francs each. Jean has made no kind of overture toward her, nor she toward him, but when they leave the cafe, they kiss in the dark street—suddenly but not surprisingly. They kiss and kiss. Then, the car presumably having been parked, they go to a nearby small hotel.

Their night together is like a rendezvous between two people who know each other well, like each other truly, and make love as if they were experienced with each other. By and by they go out for some food, then come back and literally sleep together, affectionately. In the morning Laure dresses, tries gently to bid goodbye to the sleeping Jean, then leaves. She walks down the empty street at dawn, then runs joyously. The film ends.

Look now at some of the details. Denis opens the film with shots of Paris rooftops as the sun slowly sets. This is the old-quarter Paris of René Clair, this is the opening of *Le Million* and *Sous les Toits de Paris*. But out of this legendary Paris we move into the harsh present. The narrow streets don't spell romance; they mean traffic jams. During the progress of the film, note the incised details: the young woman in the cafe playing the pinball machine who thinks that Jean's advice with the game may mean an advance and is peeved when it doesn't; the young but adequately bored desk clerk in the hotel who had hoped that the jam would bring customers but tells Laure and Jean that they have the place to themselves. Note, too, how Denis touches this gently coursing film from

time to time with Laure's imaginings, flashed in and flashed out.

But the core of the piece is not in its details. It is in the broad, tacit acceptance that a person's unexpected behavior may not be completely surprising to that person and does not necessarily upset life patterns later on. Laure, as far as we know, will in fact move in with her boyfriend the next day and will think none the less of herself for the night with Jean, a secret that may indeed fortify her partnership.

It is of the essence of *Friday Night* that, though we learn some things about her, we never learn anything—not anything—about Jean except his name. This is Laure's story. It is she who has this adventure—with a man whom she does not know and will never see again. His address and vocation and marital status, whatever they may be, would only make the evening prosaic. Free of such details, she will be able to glow when she remembers this Friday night because it was enclosed, perfected by the qualities of Jean, not data about him. This Friday night will be a private, warm mystery in the middle of a world of traffic jams.

The two actors are completely winning. Valerie Lemercier makes Laure a woman who is sexual, not by ostentation but simply by existing. She seems curious throughout the film to discover what she will do next and is pleasantly surprised by what she finds out. Vincent Lindon as Jean is impressive through his decorum and his quietness. The moment when we discover why he has asked for the ten-franc coins is one of those pleasant backward illuminations: it tells us what he has been sensing in the car without one word about it.

The sequences in the hotel bed are stirring, but not with blatant detail. Denis and her editor, Nelly Quettier, have assumed that they do not have to show the details of sex because we know them already. Instead, Denis and Quettier create a small visual poem on the subject.

Lost in Translation

Sofia Coppola

6 October 2003

Sofia Coppola's first film, *The Virgin Suicides*, was a daring choice for a debut. It was about five young sisters who killed themselves for shadowy reasons, and Coppola rendered the mystery of the story so well that absolute clarity would have debased it. Now, for her second film, she has made an equally daring choice. *Lost in Translation* is about an affair that is unconsummated and whose nonconsummation is oddly gratifying.

Coppola adapted her first film from a novel; this new screenplay is original. This in itself is good news—that this woman, still young, conceived this offbeat idea and wrote it so well. The theme is not blazingly new: *Brief Encounter* and *Roman Holiday* and (even though the lovers do go to bed) *The Bridges of Madison County* hover in the air above

it. But Coppola's characters and setting are very much her own, and that setting complements the story.

Bob Harris is a fading American film star in his fifties who goes to Tokyo to make a Japanese whiskey commercial for a fee that will amply cushion his fading. Charlotte (last name not given) is the young American wife of a young photographer who is in Japan on an assignment. They are all staying in an ultra-luxe hotel, and when Charlotte's husband is away for a week, the inevitable does not happen. Bob and Charlotte encounter casually in the hotel, and both know very early that they like each other. They meet quite often in the next few days, in the hotel and out in the city. Tokyo's mix of the familiar (neon and skyscrapers) and the remote (language and customs) seems to press the pair together. They are found, rather than lost, in this translation to another world. She knows that he is married (twenty-five years) and has children. He knows that she, a recent Yale graduate, is an even more recent bride. Both know, from life and from the fiction about such meetings, what could happen. They treat the possibility of an affair like a gift that they had better not open.

Bob's filming activity in Tokyo is splashed before us comically—the shooting of the simple commercial by a very artistic young Japanese director, the torrent of handshakes and bowings that almost every visitor to Japan must brave. (Is there another country where attendants bow to you when you enter or leave a hotel elevator or come down a department-store escalator?) We see somewhat less of Charlotte's doings, but then there aren't many for her. She tells Bob that she was a philosophy major and that she does not know what she wants to do with her life: we see her not doing it. Always, through their few days together, there is the tacit pull between them that they are both resisting and enjoying. They resist because they know that only heartache could follow for them, that this hotel in a foreign country has thrown them together for the equivalent of a ship-board romance. When Bob does leave for home, the poignancy—though it could have been stronger—is strong enough to suggest what it would have been if they had been lovers.

Possibly because she was working in Japan, Coppola has invoked a mode familiar from a few of the best Japanese directors, especially the great Yasujiro Ozu. Silence—achingly implicative silence. None of the feelings that are writhing within Bob and Charlotte are ever spoken: there isn't even oblique reference to them. In her lesser but legitimate measure, Coppola clearly believes, *à la* Ozu, that film itself by its immediacy can do most of the speaking. Simply through the very presence of these two people, in our knowledge of them, in our following them in the commonest activities—his shaving in his room, her lolling in hers—the silent ostinato of their feeling for each other flows beneath.

Bill Murray, who plays Bob, has spent much of his career implying more than he says. Usually this has been in comedy (*Groundhog Day*, for instance), but here, where the only comedy is in Bob's occasional efforts not to be heavy, Murray comes fairly close to full taciturn pathos. His secret dissatisfaction with himself, his silent scorn for the work he is doing, are humorously clear. But Bob's hunger for another lifetime that

cannot happen, a life with Charlotte, is not as moving as it ought to be. Murray's palette does not have quite enough of that color. Scarlett Johansson, as Charlotte, is emotionally lucid and appealing. But her voice is not yet adequate to her feelings.

Coppola's opening shot is good if misleading. Johansson is prone in her panties with her back to us, motionless. Just because she merely lies there for a minute or so, the shot stimulates conjectures about what is ahead. But those conjectures have nothing to do with what does follow. After this misleading shot, however, Coppola handles her film with very pleasant economy, with a kind of warm precision. Her father, who was one of this picture's producers, can be as proud of her as we are grateful.

Osama

Siddiq Barmak

8 March 2004

An Afghan film called *Osama* belongs to a special genre. Not just because it is Afghan, which is rare enough, but because it deals with political violence and was made, very shortly afterward, in the place where it happened. The head of this genre is probably Rossellini's *Rome, Open City*, which was about the German oppression of Rome and was made there in early 1945, only a few months after the Germans had left. Italians donned German uniforms to portray their recent oppressors. *Osama* was made in Kabul in 2003 and deals with the recent tyranny of the Taliban in that city. Once again victims portray their oppressors.

The director-writer and general force behind the film was Siddiq Barmak, now forty-one, whose past life would make a film in itself except that it would be difficult to believe. He became entranced with film when he was a boy (his first was *Lawrence of Arabia*), but cyclonic tumults in his country intervened between him and pursuit of a career. One paradox can typify his story. When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Barmak's family was disrupted—his father fled and was away for twelve years—yet in the course of time Barmak accepted a scholarship to a Moscow film school as his only means of progress. When he returned from Moscow in 1987, he joined the anti-Soviet guerrillas.

Much of his life since then was spent in the military. Until last year he had made only a documentary and a short film. Then, aided financially by the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, he located the one 35mm camera in Afghanistan, recruited amateur actors, and made *Osama*. We are certainly entitled to marvel at its very existence, but that isn't enough. The work itself is extraordinary.

Osama, as we know far too well, is a masculine name. Here it is given to a girl of about twelve. The time is obviously before the American arrival. The Taliban are choking the city according to their fundamentalist Muslim code, and the girl's mother cuts her daughter's hair, gets her boy's clothes, names her Osama in order to protect her. Also, the

girl will now be able to earn money for her starving family. As a boy, Osama has a job for a while but then is corralled by the Taliban along with a lot of genuine boys. They are all taken off for schooling as future members of the corps. Eventually Osama's masquerade is discovered when she has her first period, but even before that the boys suspect her. (The film omits other ways that she might have been discovered, like peeing.) The penalty for her behavior could have been death; she is spared, however, for an unappealing future.

The girl-as-boy device is hardly fresh, but Barmak uses it handily here as a means for an objective and an intimate view of the Taliban mind. We observe and we partake. The boys are of course instructed in Islam at its most fundamental, in the religious and the social modes. (Among other things, a teacher tells the boys that they may expect wet dreams and instructs them in how to wash their genitals.) The details are interesting and depressing because, as we would expect, Islam is being used here both as a means of spiritual elevation and as a *casus belli*.

What keeps the film well above the polemical is Barmak's talent. Every shot is justly framed, every camera movement is helpful. Occasionally there is a small glitch in the editing—a bit of transitional material seems to be missing—but probably this was a matter of economic stricture rather than an editing lapse. The cinematographer, Ebrahim Ghafari, is reassuringly competent. And the cast!

Recently I noted that there is a long line of good film performances by youngsters who had not been and would not continue notably as film actors. (Memorable instance: Enzo Staiola, the boy in De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief*.) To that roster we must now add Marina Golbahari as Osama. Barmak first saw her begging in the streets of Kabul and evidently perceived the range of qualities lurking in her face. Then, as they worked, he also was able to evoke in her a sense of secret being, of solitude in the midst of all the bustle and harshness around her.

All the actors are amateurs, which adds even more to Barmak's credit. Arif Herati plays a sly young street swindler with all the confidence and rhythm of a skilled vaudevillian. No one in the cast ever fails the fullness of what he or she is doing. Ultimately *Osama*, along with its other achievements, becomes a splendid example of neorealism, the style that flourished in Italy in the postwar years in which the people themselves, under talented directors, got the chance to put the people themselves on film.

Kitchen Stories

Bent Hamer

15 March 2004

What a relief. A niche of filmic reticence amid the filmic uproar. All around us swirls the battering of gargantuan films, Styrofoam epics with megatons of special effects, gleefully inane adolescent films, horror films that really are horrible. We do not actually

have to see these films—I see as few as possible—in order to feel pounded by them. But once in a while a refuge comes along, and the latest such is unique.

Kitchen Stories, from Sweden, has more than two characters, but in effect it is a two-man story. Written and directed by Bent Hamer, who has made five features since he began in 1991, it takes place for the most part in an isolated Norwegian farmhouse in the dead of winter. That sounds grim, and in a visual way it certainly is grim, but the base of the film is comedy. This is, in large part, a satire on scientism. In Sweden a group of sociologists are studying traffic patterns in kitchens. Their latest study, which took some years, discovered that in a year the average Swedish housewife, in her own kitchen, walks enough to take her to the Congo. The scientists' trade joke is that they hope to reduce her trek so that it only takes her to northern Italy. Now they are about to observe the kitchen traffic patterns of single males in Norway.

One of the observers, a middle-aged man named Folke, is sent to study a bachelor farmer named Isak. This farmer, about Folke's age, previously agreed to the study, but it takes some days before he responds to the knocking on his door. (Folke lives outside the house in a trailer he has brought.) At last the taciturn Isak admits him. Conversation between subject and observer is meant to be sparse, and here it is ultra-sparse, Folke through discipline, Isak through temperament. Folke sits on a high chair in a corner of the kitchen—something like a tennis referee's chair—and makes notes on what Isak does around him in the kitchen.

Neither of these men is colorful; what holds us is the resident humanity in each that emerges as the days and days of the study purl by. (Isak's meals are meager—by choice, one feels. Folke, in his trailer, eats better, especially since an aunt sends him food.) Little by little the "scientific" distance between them narrows, much to the dismay of Folke's supervisor, who calls occasionally. Folke and Isak become friendlier but without any of the syrup that usually accompanies such transitions. Human curiosity, not welling affection, brings them closer until, for instance, Isak admits that he drilled a little hole in the floor of his bedroom above so that he could observe the observer in the kitchen. In time Folke's supervisor is so dissatisfied with him that he is fired. This leads to an unexpected result, yet one that grows logically out of what we have seen. The very last shot of the film—neither of the men is in it—seals the quiet adventure.

The arbitrary sacredness of social studies, which are sometimes more heavy than helpful, is kidded gently. But this is only where Hamer begins. He is interested in the quality of the locale—there is plenty of nationalistic teasing between Swedes and Norwegians—and he is even more concerned with what happens to two human beings in that pseudo-laboratory situation, which is bizarre but apparently not so far from possibility. Part of the theme is a growing awareness of what it has been like for these two men to be alone. When conversation between the two men comes along, Folke reveals that except for his food-supplying aunt, he is solo. Isak says several times, almost as if he were grateful for it, that he believes that the date of one's death is always predetermined. (Later, his ailing old horse, which he loves, is taken away to be put down.) Beneath the laconic relationship between the men, even after it becomes a bit more talkative, is the

tenet that two men in one place can trace the arc of existence. This aspect made me think of Beckett (another author whose grimness is texturally comic). Folke and Isak have nowhere near the dimensions of the pair in *Waiting for Godot* or in *Endgame*, but on his level, Hamer follows Beckett's belief that, especially in an odd situation, two can make a multitude.

Following from this, I wondered about the impulse behind this film. Hundreds of films are done around the world every year that cannot hope for mass response, that exist chiefly because the makers willed them into being. *Kitchen Stories* is one of them. It makes no broad appeal. It has wit, but it is dry; it has depth, but that depth relies on the viewer's perception. The juxtaposition of the two males may—probably will—serve to suggest the awakening of latent homosexuality in two lonely men, but so far as we can see, Folke and Isak are never aware of this incursion. Hamer, who presumably knows as much about such matters as we do, apparently wanted to make his film without reference to or motivation in sex.

Hamer's directing is wry. The snowy landscapes and uncongenial interiors at the start make us think that this film may be in black and white—until there appears a tractor in fire-engine red. This jolt is funny. His editing emphasizes the constrictions of the small house. With white immensity outside, movement in the house feeds on the crumbs of available space within. The two central actors, Joachim Calmeyer (Isak) and Tomas Norström (Folke), are instances of how to be interesting without being in the least charismatic.

Abouna

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun

15 March 2004

To the tropics. *Abouna*, made in Chad, is draped in sunlight. Set in a small town, it is the second film written and directed by a Chadian native, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun. He had his film education in France and has spent much of his time in Europe: *Abouna* is a mixture of who he is and where he has been. The story of the film is a quiet local tale; the directing is sophisticated.

Two brothers, fifteen and ten, are distraught because their father has run away. They go to the movies one day (the film theater is the best building in town), and there they see—or think they see—their father in the picture. (“Abouna” means “our father.”) They steal a reel of the film and search it, in vain, for their father. The mother, sorely tried with their behavior, puts them in a Muslim school—strict but considerate compared with the one in the recent *Osama*.

The older brother tries to run away, like his father, and finally succeeds—accompanied by a deaf-mute girl. (The previous account of their immersion in love is rendered sweetly.) The younger boy sickens, the mother sickens. The story finishes with the

runaway couple in search of the boy's father, in search of larger life. "Story" is a somewhat grand word for a film that merely seems to be following some lives for a while.

The charm of the film—and that is the right word—is in Haroun's empathy for his people and in his conviction that he must put everything he knows at their service. (Close-ups of townsfolk faces, open and appealing, appear throughout.) The more subtly he deals with his subject, the more taking it becomes. Instance: with simple shots of windows and doorways that recur and recur, Haroun conveys cinematically the boys' longing for what is beyond this place.

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Michel Gondry

5 April 2004

The title of Michel Gondry's film is a clear signal. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* announces that this picture means to be both eccentric and important. A second signal is more subtle. The film's first shot is of a man sleeping, waking, getting up. Ordinary enough. Why, then, is the camera trembling? Why did the director use a handheld camera for this commonplace start? The film that follows is an explanation, and something more.

A third signal in *Eternal Sunshine*, even odder, is that, after the first two hints of strangeness, the story does not begin strangely. The oldest Hollywood plot blueprint is boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl, and *Eternal Sunshine* is so obedient to the first part of that blueprint that it is baffling. Why have we had those two odd opening signals? The screenplay is by Charlie Kaufman, known for his bizarre ideas: *Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*, both praised by others, were certainly offbeat. Not here, in the beginning. But just as we start to wonder if Kaufman has succumbed to convention, his screenplay lurches off the well-worn road.

A thirtyish man named Joel lives on Long Island and commutes to a job in Manhattan. One day, moody because of woman troubles, he unexpectedly bolts from the station platform where he is waiting for his New York-bound train and scoots over to the other platform for a train headed to Montauk, on the eastern end of Long Island. On the lonely wintry Montauk beach he sees a young woman walking past him. They do not speak, but soon they encounter each other accidentally in a diner, on the station platform, and on the otherwise empty return train. We can almost hear the plot needles clicking, especially since the dialogue is 1930s-cute, spiced with mod candor. Her name, we learn, is Clementine. She and Joel hit it off very well, with the requisite flurries of hesitation. We follow them rapidly through a considerable period of intimacy, but the 1930s formula gets a jolt. By the time the film's opening titles appear, they are breaking up. No terrible quarrel, they are just breaking up.

Thus the boy-meets-girl Part One of the pattern is quickly hemstitched, and Part Two begins. So do Joel's troubles. He has not forgotten Clementine, but she has completely forgotten him—scientifically. Clementine has had all knowledge of Joel erased from her mind by a new electronic procedure: when he and she meet one day in the bookshop where she works, she treats him cordially enough, but unfamiliarly.

Kaufman's story now zooms into science fiction as we learn about Dr. Howard Mierzwiak, a brain specialist who has perfected a system of mental erasure. The doctor advises the unhappy Joel to erase his memories of Clementine: then all will be well, or at least even. With the doctor's new process, he will induce Joel's mind to revisit all his experiences of Clementine and annul them one by one. Desperate, curious, Joel agrees.

Part Two is, for the most part, the Clementine-erasure in Joel's brain, and it is here that the film becomes its true self. From this point until the finish, most of *Eternal Sunshine* exists inside Joel's head, in the nebulous, the evanescent, the scary blendings, the ludicrous reversals, the anxieties, the wish fulfillments of dreams. Joel revisits snatches of his life with Clementine in somewhat distorted form, as the doctor's process is rubbing her out of his mind. He is with her in the bookshop, and suddenly she vanishes from the shot; objects multiply and disappear; places crowd in and whip away; a house that they visit collapses around them; fantasies materialize—suddenly he and she find themselves in a large double bed right on that wintry Montauk beach.

Very often films have attempted to portray dreams, and usually they fail because they are simply narratives or sets of symbols shown in soft focus and willowy images. *Eternal Sunshine* has the only dream sequence I know that convinces, if one can call the results of the doctor's process a dream. At any rate it is something like traversing a kaleidoscopic nightmare.

Here we come to Michel Gondry. He is a Frenchman who made his reputation with music videos and has directed a few feature films in the United States. He worked with Kaufman and Pierre Bismuth on the original story for the picture, and though Kaufman alone wrote the final screenplay, it is hard to believe that a writer forecast on a word processor every visual nuance and light storm in the dream sequence. The whole long passage is something like a cadenza in an early concerto—the composer prepared the way for the soloist, who then took over on his own. Gondry's virtuosity lifts the film far past science fiction into cinematic efflorescence. He shows us, more seductively than other directors have done, how freehand use of film can capture the flashes in our minds that slip between words.

At the last Joel tries to retain fragments of his Clementine memories, as the doctor and his assistants strive otherwise. In any event—after many mental events—Part Three begins back where the film began. Joel wakes up again in that opening shot, and now we know why the camera is handheld. He is trembly after having been through that dream, that cerebral hegira. But when did he dream? Before the film began? This makes us wonder whether the whole film, including the opening “reality,” is oneiric. Gondry and Kaufman do not say: they do not resolve anything. They seem to imply that the quintessence of life is nonresolution between the insides of our heads and the world around us.

The film ends with Joel and Clementine dreamily reunited, walking away from us down that wintry Montauk beach until they disappear and the screen is sheer white.

Gondry's filmic dazzle is greatly aided by Ellen Kuras's cinematography—something like the work that Sven Nykvist did for Bergman—and the superb editing by Valdís Óskarsdóttir. But Gondry, contrary to what we might expect from a cinematic virtuoso, is a knowing director of actors. Kate Winslet plays Clementine, and it is breathtaking to see the woman who was the young Murdoch in *Iris* and Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* giving body to this light-comedy figure. Claudette Colbert and Irene Dunne used to do it in the 1930s: Winslet, with American accent, equals them here.

Then there is Jim Carrey as Joel. Has his frame been overtaken by another spirit? The unbearable smart-ass of his first films has given way to an actor of some depth, some sorrow, some hunger for verity. Carrey sent signs of this change in *The Truman Show* and *The Majestic*. Here there is no gram of self-display: he wants only to burrow into the moment. It would be a sound performance by any actor; it is all the more laudable in a former nuisance.

Three other characters wind through the story—or around it. The doctor has three assistants, two men and a pert female blonde whose activities add variety to the proceedings. The blonde is in love with the doctor, but the tactical reason for her presence is to help anchor the film's title. It is a line from Alexander Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard": she quotes it to the doctor, and, by jiminy, he knows it too. Then they move toward sex. But the trouble with the line as title of the picture is that it has only a very tenuous relation to the story. Besides, those who happen to know the poem will also know that, far from a lover's murmur, it is spoken by a nun in praise of her chastity.

Son Frère

Patrice Chéreau

3 May 2004

The French director Patrice Chéreau is having a double career that, at least in shape and intent, is comparable to Ingmar Bergman's. Chéreau, born in 1944, directs in the theater, both plays and operas, and in film. (He also directs in television and acts from time to time.) The only theater production of his that I have seen was one that was televised, *The Ring of the Nibelungen*, done for the Bayreuth Festival in 1980 and apparently inspired by the views in Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*. Still, it seems fair to conclude that, because his theater dossier includes so many classics—*Phèdre*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Hamlet* among them—the theater and film arts function symbiotically for him, as they did for Bergman: in a kind of balance. Allowing for exceptions on both sides of the ledger, we can see that Chéreau uses film to do what he cannot do in the theater—work in close, with a physical intimacy that the stage doesn't comparably permit. In fact, his

last film was called *Intimacy*, and the camera was virtually in bed with a man and a woman to capture the heat of sex.

But the three films of Chéreau's that I have seen were a long way from Bergman quality. Thus it is pleasant to report that *Son Frère* is a real achievement, delicate, perceptive, somewhat muted but nonetheless strong. The screenplay, adapted by Chéreau and Anne-Louise Trividic from a novel by Philippe Besson, deals with two brothers, both around thirty, whose lives have diverged, especially because the younger one, Luc, is gay. Events push them together. Thomas, the elder, has been afflicted with a dangerous blood disorder; and although he has a devoted girlfriend, the intensity of his trouble, and of his fright, makes him seek Luc's help, with Luc's very estrangement as well as his concern to keep him company.

The film moves in and out of a hospital (where Thomas's doctor is a woman reminiscent of the psychiatrist in *Persona*), the brothers' apartments, and the coast of Brittany near the old family home, where the landscape prompts memories of boyhood fun and quarrels. But the real setting of the film is Thomas's illness. It becomes the ambience in which the two men find out more about each other and, of course, about themselves. Glimmering outside that dark ambience is a suggestion that the illness is a clarifier. It is not a blessing in disguise, not a metaphor: it is part of the traversal of life that affects the ill person and those who care. It affects the way they care.

Chéreau takes his time. Within the expected temporal frame of a film, the flow of minutes to which we are accustomed, he lingers, he observes, he absorbs, he rests for moods. The most obvious instance of this is the hospital scene where Thomas is being prepared for surgery by two nurses. He lies nude on his bed, and gently, amiably, they shave his entire torso. Chéreau's purpose is not fright or indignity but to dramatize the idea that here, inside this shaveable torso, this mere object, is the complexity that transforms this person into a nexus of sensibilities, radiated and received. Chéreau's patience with this scene transforms a commonplace action into a small epiphany.

As the brothers, Bruno Todeschini (Thomas) and Eric Caravaca (Luc) evoke perfectly the sense not that they have begun and are fulfilling a film, but that we have joined these brothers at this stage of their long relationship. Their deepening knowledge of their separate but joined privacies is the quintessence of the film and is quite lovely. In the lesser role of Thomas's girlfriend, Nathalie Boutefeu touches some truth about devotion and its changes. The parents of the brothers visit the hospital from time to time, but they seem to have little connection with their sons in any way or with that home in Brittany.

In any case, *Son Frère* helps to confirm the resemblance between Chéreau's career and Bergman's.

The Twilight Samurai

Yoji Yamada

10 May 2004

Yoji Yamada, born in 1931, has been making films for forty-four years. Yet, as far as I know, his seventy-seventh film, *The Twilight Samurai*, is the first to get much attention in this country. This is certainly not because Yamada has been minor in Japan. He made a long series of comedies that were very successful in his own country, and, chiefly with these popular films, he won a serious reputation. In 1982 the preeminent Japanese critic Tadao Sato said in *Currents in Japanese Cinema* that Yamada

became the only director in the 1970s to maintain a steady stream of successes and a reputation for artistic and social responsibility. A socialist, Yamada's main theme in all his works is not the class struggle but the maintaining of warm, human relations within families and communities in danger of collapse in an industrialized society.

Possibly it was the domestic focus of Yamada's work that kept him from greater international stature. Through this new film in a new genre, without losing the qualities that Sato prized in his comedies, he moves into international interest. *The Twilight Samurai* is set in an earlier time, the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when the feudalism of past centuries was replaced by modern views, and the samurai, somewhat the equivalent of medieval knights, were left masterless and adrift. (Akira Kurosawa treated this theme in *The Seven Samurai*, a peak of film art.) The protagonist of Yamada's film, Seibei, is trying to maintain his fealty to the samurai code at the same time that the ground is shifting under him. For Seibei, the shift is deepened by family obligations.

The screenplay by Yamada and Yoshitaka Asama, adapted from a novel by Shuhei Fujiwara, starts with Seibei at the moment of his wife's death, which leaves him to care for daughters aged five and ten and a senile mother. (The younger daughter, years later and a grown woman, reminisces throughout the film on the sound track.) The place is a castle and fief in northeast Japan; Seibei is a (so-called) "petty samurai" who does warehouse work for his lord yet nonetheless maintains *Bushido*, the principles of samurai honor. From the start the screen shows us that his story is envisioned through a filter of temperament. That first scene, in which Seibei's wife dies, is shadowy, with tones of brown. Forms move. Faces are not seen clearly. It is as if we were viewing the scene from inside someone's head. This beginning signals that Yamada is as interested in the ambience of the film, its enveloping moods, as he is in the story. The ambience is deepened by the presence of memory, in the daughter's voice-over.

The first conventionally explicit scene is in a sort of office where Seibei and other men, all seated on the floor of course, are ending their day's work. (It is just about here that the first strong color, a red roof, enters this earth-brown film.) Some of the men invite Seibei to go drinking with them: he declines, and at twilight—hence the film's title

and his sobriquet—he hurries home. The other men snicker at the twilight samurai, his shabby dress, his general unkemptness.

But Seibei is grave and self-possessed, not a sloven but a man committed to his various duties, burdened with the care of his dotty mother and his two beloved children. He has had to make stringent choices and is living by them. He is also caught in tectonic social shifts, between the iron of necessity and his social status. He is a samurai living like—though he would not know the term—a bourgeois. (Which adds another tone to the film's title.) Added to this dilemma is the pressure from friends and relatives to remarry. A childhood girlfriend, who has been married and has recently divorced, is clearly interested in him, but by the time Seibei reaches the point where he can propose to her, other factors enter.

Most of this two-hour film is more concerned with character than with action, with social subtleties rather than overt conflict. Yamada gives us communion with Seibei, rather than adventure. But then comes a matter that jars Seibei out of his quasi-bourgeois being. His lord, to whom he owes complete obedience, sends an order through underlings that Seibei is to kill a man. This man, a superior samurai, had been ordered by the lord, for his own reasons, to commit *hara-kiri*. The man has refused, has barricaded himself in his house, and has killed one officer who tried to kill him.

Seibei has already shown, in an encounter with the former husband of his girlfriend, that he has not lost any of his samurai combat skills. His obligation to keep himself in *Bushido* trim, though his work is running a warehouse, is part of the story's complexity, its position on a historical cusp. When Seibei gets the order to kill the disobedient samurai, he immediately prepares to obey, though his friends and relatives plead otherwise. He no longer has his samurai sword: hard times had forced him to sell it. He fashions a bamboo sword. At last, after his hair has been ritually trimmed and arranged by his girlfriend, Seibei sets out for the guilty man's house.

The duel scene, which is what this encounter becomes, is especially memorable. It is shot in that brownish shadow tone that we saw at the film's beginning. At first the indicted man tries to be rational with Seibei and asks to be allowed to escape. He is not frightened but is flatly disgusted with samurai tradition, with the practice of *hara-kiri* and the punishment of a man who refuses it. Seibei, of a lower samurai order, is (quite credibly) more firm in samurai beliefs, and persists. They fight. We get only occasional glimpses of the two men's faces: mostly we see figures moving in silhouette against large windows. What the dimness suggests is the fading of one age and the approach of a new one, a cultural *agon* crystallized in two men.

The visual treatment gives the fight, the very fight, some poignancy. The cinematographer, Mutsuo Naganuma, has exquisitely realized this aura. The costumes, predictably apt, were designed by Akira Kurosawa's daughter, Kazuko Kurosawa, who began her career with some of her father's later films. Heading the cast, Hiroyuki Sanada gives Seibei quiet distinction, built on an acceptance of fate. Sanada has had a wide career in Japanese film, has also appeared in Tom Cruise's vehicle *The Last Samurai*, and is more exceptional for having played Lear's Fool with the Royal Shakespeare Company in

London a few years back. Intently yet dexterously, he gives Seibei a realized being.

Welcome to Yoji Yamada. After decades of comedies, he arrives—in this country, at least—with a uniquely touching samurai film. At the age of seventy-three, he starts a new career.

Strayed

André Téchiné

17 May 2004

A few weeks ago France sent us *Bon Voyage*, a farce whose background was the German invasion of 1940. Now here is *Strayed*, which uses the same background for a romance. But it is a romance only partly in the conventional sense: chiefly it is romantic in the expansive sense—extraordinary actions in the midst of recognizable reality. Hawthorne, defining romance, said that although it must adhere to human truth, it “has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances . . . of the writer’s own choosing or creation.” He foresaw *Strayed*.

The screenplay is by Gilles Taurand and André Téchiné (who directed), adapted from a novel by Gilles Perrault. In May 1940 a young widow, Odile, is fleeing southward from Paris with her thirteen-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter. They are in their car, progressing slowly in a long and wretched file of other Parisian refugees, most of them on foot. Candid touches abound: farmers overcharge the refugees for water. Terror abounds: German planes strafe and bomb this civilian procession. Odile, who is a former teacher, summons all her calmness and strength for the rescue of her children, but strength fizzles out. They are suddenly befriended by a youth of seventeen, named Yvan, who seems a sort of street person very much at ease amid all this turmoil.

Odile’s car is bombed and burned—she and the children are hiding in a field during the raid—and Yvan, a taciturn, resourceful fellow, locates an abandoned house in the woods nearby. This is where the Hawthornean romance begins. Odile, her children, and Yvan take refuge in this house—Yvan climbs the wall to a window, then opens the door—where they ensconce themselves. Yvan hunts and fishes; Odile, helped as far as possible by her easily adjusting children, tends the big and beautiful house. Thus they are all surviving while the world around them is churning. They are kept up-to-date by the radio that Yvan has fixed, though he has cut the telephone wires, apparently to keep them isolated and safe. It is as if these four people had been cast ashore on a small island in a tremendous angry sea.

Easily, enticingly, the point of the film clarifies. The situation forces Odile to find resources in herself that she did not know were there. Yvan, though he has odd and sudden reticences, is seemingly even more at ease now, prepared and deft no matter what happens. The children, in their own universe, enjoy most of what is happening, the boy wide-eyed and protective of his mother, the girl generally quite comfy. The implicit

contrast, only occasionally explicit, is between their desert-island life and the invisible maelstrom roundabout. The safety of this refuge, along with its chance for self-discoveries, cannot last permanently, of course. But, before it is broken, it is tinged unexpectedly by Odile's discovery of Yvan's background and by her eventual response.

The cinematography by Agnès Godard, who did the unforgettable *Dreamlife of Angels*, follows a by-now familiar plan. The film begins in black and white—who would want that horrendous refugee flight in color?—and acquires color as personalities intensify. Leaves become green, wheat fields become golden. André Téchiné directed with the implication of restrained excitement that made *My Favorite Season* so savory. Téchiné has a reputation in France as an especially empathic director of women—Catherine Deneuve and Juliette Binoche among them—and he has understood this Odile very well.

She is played by Emmanuelle Béart, who worked with Téchiné previously in *I Don't Kiss* (unseen by me). Béart has become a princess of understatement, like Isabelle Huppert. And like Huppert, Béart depends on the camera to comprehend what it is that she is not showing. The difference between this method and sheer blankness, like Björk's in von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, is blatant. Björk is merely present: Béart convinces us of her union with Odile and convinces, too, that it would be gross to express more than she does. Since Béart's beginning in the wonderful *Manon of the Spring*, by Claude Berri, and in Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*, where her nudity for three hours did not impair her performance, she has brought life to what she does. Here the screenplay might have provided a few more defining touches; still we are moved by what the flight from Paris and the experience of Yvan have done to her.

Gaspard Ulliel, stubbornly and slyly proud, is entirely interesting as what Yvan is and what he suggests that he was. *Strayed* is Ulliel's third film. More, I'm sure, lie ahead of him.

Since Otar Left

Julie Bertucelli

24 May 2004

Esther Gorintin, Polish-born, lives in Paris, where she has spent most of her life as a dental assistant. At the age of eighty-five she began acting in films, and now, five years later, she appears in *Since Otar Left*. Heaven only knows what fine performances we have missed while she was telling dental patients to “open wider, please.” In her latest film, white-haired and stoop-shouldered yet sturdy, she plays a grandmother of quiet obstinacy and tacit wisdom, and Gorintin does the role with the economy of an actress who has had much more experience than hers.

The place is Tbilisi in post-Soviet Georgia. Eka, the grandmother, a woman of some cultivation who is fluent in French and stubborn in her politics, lives with Marina (Nino Khomasuridze), her daughter, and Marina's daughter, Ada (Dinara Droukarova).

Marina has a job, Ada is a student, Eka does a good deal to keep their modest, pleasant household in shape. But the gem of Eka's life is not there—her son, Otar, a doctor, who for unspecified reasons has gone to Paris and has found jobs as a construction worker. The three women are unified but distinct. Eka pines for Otar's letters and phone calls. Marina, the widow of a soldier killed in Afghanistan, is more or less accepting of her life as it is. Ada, who loves the other two more deeply than she cares to express, is discontent—with herself and her prospects.

While Eka is away at their small country place, word comes to Marina that Otar has been killed in an accident. She and her daughter resolve to hide the news from Eka, using false messages and forged letters from Otar. (Here the story resembles Károly Makk's *Love*, in which a young woman keeps her husband's fate from his ill mother.) At last Eka decides to visit Otar in Paris. She sells things of theirs to buy tickets for all three of them: Marina and Ada go along to be with her when she learns the truth. Eka finds it out on her own, so to speak, and the effect of that discovery is quite unlike what the younger women expected. One further unforeseen effect: Eka's response helps Ada to make a new choice.

The last minutes of the film are exhilarating, but its real triumph is in everything that precedes the ending—the relatively simple lives of the three women up to that point. The film keeps us interested in the texture of its sheer dailiness. All three actresses are first-rate—Eka, nothing like a greeting-card grandma, carefully administering love; Marina converting her bitterness into a means of meeting the minutes of the day; Ada managing to be both highly private and durably affectionate.

Much of the credit for this quality must go to the director, Julie Bertucelli, who co-wrote the screenplay with several collaborators. Now in her thirties, the daughter of a director, Jean-Louis Bertucelli, she has worked with Bertrand Tavernier and Krzysztof Kieślowski, no mean exemplars of prime technique committed to human understanding. Bertucelli induces us to live in that apartment with her three women. She has kept the film in a palette of muted colors, almost suggesting black and white, as if to emphasize that these lives are interesting as lived, not as dramatic events. Further, she sometimes composes shots in especially revealing ways. Near the end, for instance, the three women are at the Paris airport en route home and are having a conversation of great importance to them. The camera is somewhat above and slightly away from them while the airport crowds pour around them, yet their three voices are close to us. Here are three women trying to clarify their futures in the middle of the world's whirl.

We can look forward, I'm sure, to more Bertucelli. And more, I certainly hope, of Gorintin.

Carandiru

Hector Babenco

31 May 2004

Hector Babenco, born in Argentina, has made most of his films in Brazil and the United States, and most of those films have dealt with people on the fringes of society. *Pixote* followed the life of a ten-year-old street criminal in São Paulo. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, with William Hurt and Raul Julia, dealt with two men, one of them gay, locked in a South American prison cell. Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep played homeless alcoholics in *Ironweed*. In all these films, Babenco showed several kinds of strength. Whether or not the film succeeded as a whole, there was never any question about the director's piercing vision or his compassion for those in social darkness.

Now Babenco caps his career with *Carandiru*. Remarkably, he does it with a subject that he has treated before—imprisonment—and that is very familiar in films. At one point in this 155-minute picture, someone even mentions old black-and-white prison movies. But *Carandiru* is not in black and white (like some other recent films, however, its palette is muted), and it is certainly not just another prison movie. No element in the story, or collection of stories, has much novelty: yet the picture grips, because we sense that the director clearly knows he is treating familiar material and forges ahead out of passion.

Formally, *Carandiru* itself was not a penitentiary but a house of detention in São Paulo, a place where, under Brazilian law, known criminals who had been re-arrested were kept while awaiting trial for new crimes. Eight thousand men were held in a place built for three thousand, and some of them had been there for years. In 1992 a riot flamed in *Carandiru*: 110 prisoners were killed by the police. The international uproar over what had presumably been a massacre led eventually to the demolition of the building in 2002—recorded here by Babenco. What he doesn't show is the place to which the inmates were transported, possibly because that would only be *Carandiru*, Part Two.

Probably the buzzword "docudrama" must be used for this film: it is factual but reenacted. Babenco's screenplay, written with three collaborators, comes from a book by a prison doctor, Dráuzio Varella, who was assigned to help stop the spread of AIDS in *Carandiru*. ("Anyone who says he doesn't have sex here is a liar," one of the inmates tells Varella.) The doctor's true concern, his acceptance of the inmates' ethics and of their own judicial system, gains their confidence. He utters no word of comment, but his very experience in *Carandiru* is a declaration. He sees, as do we, that the legal system—everywhere—moves toward the reform of a criminal by locking him up with other criminals. (The idea of prison as a deterrent is a cackling joke: if prisons had deterred through the centuries, there would no longer be any.) Yes, society must be protected, and no generally available substitute for prison has yet been found. So Babenco is here concerned with the inner society created by the self-protection of the larger society.

None of this, I repeat, is new. All of this, I repeat, is gripping: because Babenco has fashioned his film without polemic intent but with all the art at his command, which is

considerable. He has allowed the content to speak for itself. Some flashback sequences about prisoners' previous lives take place of course outside the prison: otherwise, we watch the unrolling of a giant tapestry, woven with scenes that range from degradation to a kind of warped probity. Babenco's camera wriggles into crowded cells, and it also encompasses volatile crowds. The riot itself and its sequel are breathtaking spectacle.

The large cast, from killers to "queens," is flawless. Perhaps the modest doctor should be urged to take a bow—Luiz Carlos Vasconcelos, who gives us a man who understands more than he talks about. Notable, too, throughout the picture is the lighting by Walter Carvalho, which maintains the atmosphere of enclosure without melodrama.

At the last, *Carandiru* must leave the problem where Babenco found it. Which is where Bernard Shaw found it in 1925. Here is the first sentence of Shaw's long essay on this subject:

Imprisonment as it exists today is a worse crime than any of those committed by its victims; for no single criminal can be as powerful for evil, or as unrestrained in its exercise, as an organized nation.

Babenco, whether he knows it or not, breathes amen.

Facing Windows

Ferzan Özpetek
5 July 2004

Massimo Girotti was a sterling actor, handsome, magnetic, genuine, so attractive that it sometimes diverted attention from his artistry. He died in January 2003, at the age of eighty-four, and his last film, dedicated to him, has just arrived here, thus offering a chance to toss a flower toward his memory.

Many of Girotti's films were shown in the United States—he made 118 of them, including television work—but he may be best remembered here as the lover of Brando's wife in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. Girotti worked with most of the great Italian directors through a great era of Italian film. He played important roles in (to name a few) Rossellini's *Un Pilota Ritorna* (1942), Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943, derived from Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*), Germi's *In Nome delle Legge* (1949), Antonioni's first feature, *Cronaca di un Amore* (1950), and Pasolini's *Medea* (1969). As time went on, when Girotti appeared in a film, it was like seeing a living testament to a cultural era.

The dedication, "a Massimo," is what appears first on the screen in *Facing Windows*, justly enough in any case because it is Girotti's performance that envelops the picture in a quasi-mystical atmosphere. The screenplay was written by Gianni Romoli and Ferzan Özpetek, who directed. Özpetek is a Turk who had his film education in Italy and has made three previous features. This new film deals with subjects, or at least approaches

to them, that have not often been touched; and they register because, like all good art, much of what the film is about is left unsaid.

The first sequence takes place in Rome, in 1943. In a bakery a young apprentice is, for some reason, trying to get out of the place. His boss grabs him to stop him; the youth stabs the boss and escapes. Later we learn what the reason was.

Sixty years later, in fact. In modern Rome a young woman, Giovanna, is walking home one afternoon with her husband, Filippo, when they meet a man in his eighties, well-dressed, dignified (Girotti, of course), who holds out money to them. He is lost, he says, and will pay them to help him figure out where he is. They decline the money, and Filippo drives the man to the nearest police station. But the place is so crowded that Filippo has to bring him home for the night. Giovanna is nervous about having this odd stranger in their apartment with their two children, but he is so quiet, often so abstracted and always so well-mannered, that she is reconciled.

Giovanna, we soon see, is the center of the story: the old man is one of the forces that eventually affect her. Another is a young man who lives in an apartment across the way, whom she often watches from her kitchen window. The following evening after work, she is to drive the old man back to the police station, but she stops first to deliver some cakes that she has made for a neighboring café. (She has a job as an accountant, but baking is her avocation.) There she meets the young man who lives across the way—Lorenzo, as she learns—who tells her that the old man has just left her car. Lorenzo helps her to look for him; they find him sitting quietly, thoughtfully, beside one of those ubiquitous Roman fountains. Unwittingly, he subsequently leads them to a clue about himself.

Giovanna is solidly married, though she and her husband have a continual litany of bickering under their affection. She is discontent, however, not because of the bickering but simply from having lived for nine years in the same set of circumstances and feelings. Two catalysts have arrived to affect her. First, the old man, whose thoughtful comments about her avocation linger in her. When at last he finds his way back to his home and she traces him, she finds out that he is a master in his profession—a famous pastry chef who treats his work as a high vocation. (He was the youth of the opening 1943 sequence.) Urged by him, she follows her own gifts in this calling, which is treated, however peripheral it may seem to the world's gravity, as a locus for high standards. The second catalyst is Lorenzo, who, she learns, has been spying on her, too. He is in love with her, and she responds—almost. But his adoration of her apparently reminds Giovanna eventually of the value of her workaday marriage. The real windows in the picture's title are the openings these two men have offered her—not a startlingly original idea, but warmly enhanced by the director and the cast.

Özpetek is an enriching director. More than a presentation of its contents, every scene seems also to be a distillation of the matters that led to it. He can take a somewhat worn device—moving the camera around his people as they talk—and make it savory: his circling of the dinner table when the old man has his first meal in Giovanna's apart-

ment becomes a moment of communion. His handling of the fantasies when the old man's memories slip onto the screen is dreamily evocative.

Özpetek, who has had theater experience, shows empathy and skill with his actors. Giovanna is Giovanna Mezzogiorno, who looks like a slightly more melancholy Debra Winger: she is immediately whole, a woman replete with a range of secret stirrings. Filippo Nigro as Filippo convinces that this shaven-headed feckless workingman is basically gentle and is, as his wife knows, a good father. Lorenzo, Raoul Bova, is exceptionally appealing in a non-vain way, and makes the character's longing for Giovanna a truth.

And there is Girotti. The man he plays, whose name turns out to be Davide, seems to come to us through a long, shadowy arcade of years. His mind occasionally becomes misty because of that journey. We learn two facts about him that illuminate: one explains the opening murder sequence, the other explains his air of hauntedness. Girotti has the gift to make Davide's past part of the present. When he sits staring into space, it is like stilled music.

A Massimo, indeed.

The Terminal

Steven Spielberg

26 July 2004

The basic idea of *The Terminal*, Steven Spielberg's new film, comes from the story of an Iranian citizen who became trapped in a Paris airport with an invalid passport. He could neither enter France nor go home. With this fact as base, Sacha Gervasi and Jeff Nathanson have fashioned a screenplay for Spielberg—original story by Gervasi and Andrew Niccol—set in the international terminal of Kennedy Airport in New York.

That basic idea is stimulating. Airports, as experiences, are haunting. I have never been in an airport in any country when I did not feel that I was, if only briefly, immured—cut off from normal life even as it is visible from the windows. That entrapment, I thought, could be an apt start for film imagining. For myself, two views of airports prevail. First, a major airport terminal is a commercially compressed caricature of the civilization around it. The shops, the food places that range from grub counters to mock-luxurious restaurants, the ubiquitous television screens blazoning various kinds of drivel, the omnipresent neon nimbus that is vaguely nauseating, the conflicting traffic patterns of anxious motion and boring stasis, the sense that the control of one's life is in the hands of invisible scoffing powers—all these form a closely packed cartoon of the world outside.

And there is an entirely different terminal nightmare. It has nothing at all to do with the world around it. The traffic outside is a clever illusion. Instead, the terminal is a space station far away from planet Earth, with Earth-based planes arriving and departing. Perhaps, one can think, the terminal is a way station of the afterlife. All of us here

have died. The planes bring the newly deceased: then, after some period of airport limbo, take them on into infinity.

I hoped that Spielberg, whose imaginative faculty is well proved, would go far beyond my own conceits. But he went nowhere. After he chose the airport and the stranded man, it seems that he was stuck. He didn't know what to do with that man for the duration of the film. Spielberg apparently viewed his film as a two-hour container that had to be stuffed with material. What his writers and he have come up with is a screenplay that practically moans with desperation at the burden of filling those two hours.

The protagonist is Viktor Navorski (not Victor Navasky, who is someone else). He comes from a country named Krakozia, which has had a revolution while he was in flight; the change of government invalidates his papers. He cannot enter America or go home. He must wait—for almost a year, as it turns out. That year is treated by Spielberg without any perceptive response to the terminal as such and, aside from superficial irritations, utterly without any exploration of the effect on Viktor of his statelessness. The two hours are filled somehow: a romance with an airline hostess who is otherwise engaged; another romance between a new friend, a food handler who feeds Viktor, and a customs woman; an argumentative Indian sweeper; pratfalls on slippery floors; a renovation project in the terminal on which Viktor (who is a professional builder) works; a running vaudeville routine between him and the government official in charge of his case; and other wisps. In short, any inspiration that the setting and the man's political dilemma might have evoked is jettisoned—for scraps of old movies.

This is somewhat shocking. Spielberg's career has ranged from the exalted (*Schindler's List*) to the extraordinary (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*) to the cheerily entertaining (*E.T.* and *Catch Me If You Can*) to fare intended, as they say, for children of all ages (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Jurassic Park*), but even at the low end of the Spielberg spectrum, there has always been some air of ingenuity, some sense of the maker's excitement. Not here. *The Terminal* plods in spirit and execution.

Alex McDowell designed a cruelly veristic immense terminal for the film. Michael Kahn edited the picture adroitly, trying to lift some limp material. Janusz Kaminski, a marvelous cinematographer, didn't get much chance for marvels but supplied what the film needs. Catherine Zeta-Jones, as lovely as ever, is authentic in the few good moments that the cobbled-up hostess role allows her. Stanley Tucci clearly knows that he has a clichéd part as the beleaguered government official and does his best to give it some polish.

The disappointment in the cast is, once again, Tom Hanks, who plays Viktor. The man who gave such full performances in *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump* and *A League of Their Own* has of late been gliding through roles rather than inhabiting them. This was first apparent in *Saving Private Ryan*, in which he had a decently rounded character and simply did not authenticate it. In *The Terminal* the gliding is even worse, because the role is a thing of shreds and patches. Hanks tried to characterize Viktor's walk, but that was about all the creation. (The reason for Viktor's American visit, when we finally learn

it, makes the role even more of a figment of story conferences—and almost excuses Hanks's failure to realize it.)

But the worst disappointment is with Spielberg. To expect, even to hope for, another *Schindler's List* would be unreasonable. But where at least is the dexterous entertainer? In *The Terminal*, the Indian sweeper turns out to be an ingenious juggler. The ingenious Spielberg turns out to be an airport sweeper.

Stage Beauty

Richard Eyre

1 November 2004

Through the first two thousand years of European theater, every play was performed by an all-male cast. Popular entertainments of various sorts were another matter. Women were not permitted to act in the (let's call them) legitimate theaters of Europe until the sixteenth century, in Italy and France and Spain—then a century later in Britain. All female roles had been played by boys and young men. Some dramatists in those earlier days included comments on these conditions in their work. Shakespeare's Cleopatra, anticipating inevitable theater performances of her story, says, "I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness." Consider that the word "boy" is here a verb and that the queen is deploring the idea of a male playing her: then remember that, in the first production, this line was spoken by a young man in female dress. It's dizzying.

The gender bar in the English theater was lifted when Charles II returned to Britain in 1660 after the country's eleven years of Puritan rule. Theaters had been closed under Cromwell. Charles and his court had spent their exile in France and came back tempered by the experience. Theaters were re-opened, and, as in France, women could now act. But the abolition of the gender bar raised a problem. The employment of women brought a crisis to males who had been playing female roles. What were they to do? An American playwright named Jeffrey Hatcher has addressed the subject, then adapted his play for the screen, and here it is—*Stage Beauty*.

For his protagonist Hatcher chose Ned Kynaston, a noted performer of women's roles in the early Restoration days, and Kynaston is played by Billy Crudup. This is the sort of event that, after it has happened, we feel that we foresaw. Actor and role seem a predestined union. Crudup is a phenomenon who is only beginning to get the sort of recognition he deserves. Clearly he has always been an unusual actor, fine-featured, fascinatingly versatile, but few thought that he would make it into the front rank of stars. Gradually we are seeing that this is exactly what Crudup is aiming at: he wants to be relied on for acting, not for the merchandising of charisma. This is a peculiar choice these days, but Crudup is making it stick. In films he has played, among others, a rock musician, a drug addict, an Olympic athlete; in the New York theater he has done Chekhov and Stoppard, and he gave an accomplished performance as Oedipus in a

new play on the subject. Now here he is, clad in Restoration dresses, made up, wigged, flouncy, as a man whose profession is playing women. To Crudup, ladies and gentlemen who still care about acting, attention must be paid.

The film begins with Kynaston at the top of his profession, praised for his Desdemona and Ophelia and other female roles. King Charles, a devoted theatergoer, is one of his admirers, as is Samuel Pepys, who wrote about him. Elegant ladies like to take Kynaston about in their carriages in his female array. Then the custom shifts: the theater employs women, and Kynaston is stranded. He has trained for years to play women, and now he is professionally bereft. When it is suggested that he play men, he protests that men are not beautiful and do nothing beautiful. But his adoring dresser, Maria, played by Claire Danes, helps to persuade him to move into male roles.

One persuasion is sexual. Kynaston's stage sexuality had spilled into his life: he has been willing, if not more than, to play a woman in bed. Maria, who herself has acting plans, refocuses him sexually—and, as a result, artistically. In the film's last sequence we see Kynaston as a raging Othello and Maria as a willowy Desdemona in the strangling scene, and their success in their roles restarts both their lives.

If *Stage Beauty* is in sum less moving than interesting, it certainly sustains that interest—with warm lamplit interiors and swirling costumes and good acting. It was directed by Richard Eyre, eminent in the English theater and experienced in film. (The lovely *Iris*, about Iris Murdoch, was his.) Eyre has directed this new picture fluently, even literally so: the camera glides a great deal. Stylistically, as he certainly knows, the strangling scene is a liberty. The two actors play that scene, in order to impress the king, with a realism that is two centuries ahead of its time, which anachronism Eyre apparently thought was necessary for today's audience. Another liberty is the presence of Nell Gwyn as the king's mistress. She did indeed become his mistress, but in 1660 she was ten years old.

Rupert Everett plays King Charles with such pleasure in his foppery that it would be mean to deny him any of it. Danes has charm and pathos in her devotion to Kynaston. Crudup is whole. He creates the man who has pride in what he does, who is suddenly stripped of the work and the pride; and who makes his way, somewhat painfully, to another sort of pride. His story is a small but acute poignancy in the history of the theater, and Crudup realizes it completely.

But why didn't they add a note at the end? Kynaston went on from that glimpse of his Othello to a long and successful career in leading male roles. That fact makes his life even more remarkable.

Vera Drake

Mike Leigh

8 November 2004

The English director Mike Leigh has spent most of his life making films about the short and simple annals of the London working class, and he has done them with an anger transmuted into art, as in *Naked* and *Secrets and Lies*. Now there is *Vera Drake*, done with Leigh's customary skill in giving the environment great weight in a story. A Leigh picture isn't merely set in the homes of the poor: those homes are inseparable from the very beings of the characters.

The new film takes place in 1950, for the most part in those regions of London that are Leigh country. Vera Drake is a middle-aged woman, a housemaid in an upper-class home. She lives with her auto-mechanic husband and their two grown children in an apartment so small that we feel cramped as we watch. Vera has another occupation. After her day's work, she scurries from one working-class home to another, performing abortions—either on unmarried women or on wives already burdened with large families. Vera uses a syringe and a very soapy solution of water, does the job, and leaves the patient with usually correct predictions of the result. What Vera is doing is of course illegal. An accident with one of the women eventually brings the police to Vera, followed by a trial and a jail sentence.

Leigh's point is that the law stopped Vera from helping poor women who couldn't afford professional care. They were risking shame or worsened poverty, and the state cruelly interfered with her ministrations. My own reaction was not what Leigh intended. I felt that she should have been stopped a good deal sooner. Most of her patients seemed to have come through all right, but there was always a strong chance that they wouldn't, and some of them didn't. The pregnant women's worry is clear enough, but possible death is not a remedy that evokes sympathy. Anyway, the English law on abortion has somewhat changed, which makes this a historical picture.

Besides, Leigh's screenplay rather mawkishly loads the story in Vera's favor. She is an unflagging angel of mercy: when she isn't aborting the pregnant, she is helping the sick and the aged, providing a "cuppa" and a cheery word. She doesn't get a penny for her operations. Another woman arranges the appointments and takes a fee: Vera doesn't even know about the money. To underscore the injustice in her punishment, Leigh shows us a young woman in the posh house where Vera works, who becomes pregnant and gets high-priced hospital help. Unlike other Leigh films, this one insists on informing us that the rich are better off than the poor.

But Leigh's directing is lean and tight. In Imelda Staunton as Vera, he has an actress who can make her only two emotions interesting. Either Vera is chirping happily as she helps others or she is weeping after she is arrested. Staunton does them both affectingly enough.

Nobody Knows

Hirokazu Kore-eda

28 February 2005

In 1988, Japanese newspapers carried a story about four children who had been abandoned by their mother in a Tokyo apartment. Ranging in age from about four to fourteen, two boys and two girls, the children had managed to keep going for six months. Toward the end of that time, a neighboring girl dropped out of school and joined them. Inevitably, the group did not come through unscathed.

It turned out that each of the original four had a different father. The mother's job that took her away from them is not specified, but with the facts of the family's background and her sudden departure, a guess is possible. Before she left, she was affectionate, yet she had no qualms about skipping off. During her absence she sent the children money—once, anyway. The report of the long abandonment has some unexplained aspects: the landlady of the apartment house, for instance, knew that the children were alone and took no action. Still, the basic facts are there and are uncanny.

Those facts fascinated a director named Hirokazu Kore-eda. More truly, he was fascinated by the children themselves. He wrote a script called *Nobody Knows* that included many of the scroungy details: the stacks of unwashed dishes, the thefts from food shops, and so on. But Kore-eda chiefly wanted to know about the children—how they thought and felt and adjusted to their abandonment, which they apparently came to accept as permanent; how they willed their way along. Primarily, he wanted to live with those children—in a two-hour distillation of those six months.

Two hours, as it turns out, is a little too much. There is not much progress in the film: actions are repeated and repeated. Reportedly Kore-eda trimmed the story somewhat, and it could have used a bit more. Of course the repetition itself is part of the point, but Kore-eda could have made it with fewer recurrences. Yet the film is sustained—and, for the most part, well sustained—by the children. The four young actors, and the ultimate fifth, go through the months almost with a kind of patience. Not once does one of them cry. They play and quarrel and laugh; one of them plants seeds in flowerpots on the balcony.

As is usual with good performances by children, we are really talking about the director. Child actors—the history of film bulges with examples—can be astonishingly deft at emotional mimicry, and they are generally at their best when they are emoting heavily one way or another. These four children, plus one, don't get much chance for display, though there are some anguished moments. The astonishment here is in the fact that for most of the film the children are just living—filling up the hours and days and weeks in that apartment.

Thus, because of the stasis rather than high drama, all through the picture I admired Kore-eda. How reassuringly he must have dealt with those child actors, particularly the youngest ones. He had to earn their trust, to instill a desire in them to please him. The older boy, who was twelve at the time of the shooting, won the Cannes Festival prize last

year for best male performance. Most festival prizes are not worth disagreeing with, but this one calls for comment. Yuya Yagira, the winner, has a sensitive face and is engaging and sturdy throughout. But rationally the prize should have been shared with Kore-eda. In some degree a director contributes to almost all good acting at any age, but adult actors begin with inner resources. Virtually everything in this twelve-year-old's performance had to be awakened in him by the director. This is not to say that Yagira was just obeying orders; quite the contrary. Kore-eda led him into creation of the role.

Up and Down

Jan Hrebejk

28 February 2005

What do two truck drivers who smuggle immigrants, an ex-con who is a security guard, a young woman with a penchant for stealing babies, and an old and ailing professor have in common? A Czech film called *Up and Down* burrows along in order to find out. Long ago a novelist told me that there are two ways of writing novels. One kind of author knows what his characters are going to do. The other kind (himself included, he said) writes in order to find out what the characters will do. Occasionally a film comes along that seems to be written out of comparable curiosity. In this picture several disparate stories are launched at the start, and seemingly the film was made in order to find out how they would connect.

The basics were concocted—or one might say the game was designed—by Petr Jarchovský and Jan Hrebejk. The former then organized a screenplay, and the latter directed it. Each of them did well by the other and by us. Insofar as this film explores life in the Czech Republic, it does not seem much different from earlier films about life in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, the primary flavor isn't even Czech: it can be subsumed under the nebulous rubric "European." Certainly there are American films in which things seem merely to happen rather than to click in by design; but that sort happens along more often in Europe. (*Amélie*, from France, was a relatively recent example.)

Two Czech truckers cross the border into their homeland and must quickly unload. Their freight is a group of Indian immigrants whom they have smuggled in. After the immigrants have scooted, the truckers discover that a baby has been left behind. In fairly short order the two men contrive to sell the infant to a childless woman in Prague who takes it home to be raised by her and her husband. Hubby, a security guard, discovers something that his wife had not noticed: the infant is not Caucasian.

How this situation hooks up with an old professor and his live-in lady-friend and his divorced wife and his adult son, and how the subject of race gets a gratifying finish—these are the junctures toward which the film spirals. The general tone is amiable, pleasing, rather than hilarious, something like old Lubitsch and Wilder pictures. *Up and Down* doesn't have the edge of those earlier films, but it's agreeable to see a picture

that holds us without perspiring to do so. We are treated not as an audience but as café chums to whom a story is being told.

One oddity. Though there is no explicit sex in this film, it has a cousinly relationship to the porn that I have seen. In those films the women were almost always pretty, and some of them were gorgeous: the men were as a rule much less good-looking, and were employed only because they were indubitably male. In this Czech film all the women, young and less young, have some measure of attractiveness; all the men are masculine enough (though without physical proof), and they are all plain. I doubt that Hrebejk cast his picture by porno protocol, but I couldn't help wondering by what standards he reached the same result.

Nina's Tragedies

Savi Gabizon

11 April 2005

A fourteen-year-old Israeli boy named Nadav says of his father's funeral: "I wore sunglasses so people couldn't see that I wasn't crying." The complexities behind that remark, attended by other complexities, are the subject of *Nina's Tragedies*. Written and directed by Savi Gabizon, who teaches filmmaking at Tel Aviv University, this picture explores a bourgeoisie comparable to the American one that we know, yet markedly different. Two facts differentiate it: the chill of terrorism, lurking just outside the sleek modern homes in a Tel Aviv suburb, and the religious schism. Nadav's mother is a swinging fashion designer; his father is a Hasid. They have divorced, and the boy lives with his mother.

Her sister is the Nina of the title. Nina is an editor at a publishing house, and when her husband is killed by terrorists, her sister sends Nadav to live with her as a comfort. Since Nina is lovely and Nadav is fourteen, he is entranced. After a while, another man enters Nina's life; also some story strands that Nadav has brought with him begin to grow. Gabizon's view of screenwriting is double. In narrative method, much of the picture is more or less what we would have expected in any American picture, yet some of the story spins out in unexpected tangential episodes. Those episodes never seem television padding *à la* Binder: they suggest a fireside storyteller remembering things that he must include in his account.

Gabizon has wit: a wobbly wheel on a funeral bier is good for a chuckle. He has a sense of imminence: one evening, sex is interrupted by news of a death. He has a sense of the caprices of the brain: Nina eventually confesses her shame that she thought the soldier who brought her terrible news, a man called Avinoam, was sexy. Overall *Nina's Tragedies* is another instance of a subject discussed here lately—a foreign film that is seen one way at home and another way abroad. To Israelis, who have loaded this picture with prizes, it evidently dramatizes the familiar. In this country Gabizon's film has

novelty: it brings us a Western quality in Israeli life that is absent from the recurrent stark news.

Ayelet July Zurer is affecting as Nina, Alon Aboutboul is quietly rugged as Avinoam, and Aviv Elkabets fills the bill as Nadav. Gabizon's talent fixes the sophistication-cum-brutality that he is after; and the cinematography by David Gurfinkel, with its illuminating shadows, helps Gabizon greatly.

Me and You and Everyone We Know

Miranda July

11 July 2005

The standard for *Me and You and Everyone We Know* is stated in the middle of the picture. The director of a center for modern art tells her assistant that her criterion for selecting pieces is that they could not have been made in another era. This film is most assuredly of our time. Here are a few things that happen in it. A young man separating from his wife sets his hand on fire so that his two sons will remember the day as significant. Two eighteen-year-old girls compete in fellatio skill on a fourteen-year-old boy. A seven-year-old boy makes a coprophiliac date via the Internet, and on the park bench where they meet he encounters a mature woman. (She kisses him ruefully and leaves.)

Usually it is unfair to cite bizarre moments in a film, because they may have an altered effect, integral, when they appear in context. But the integration happens so successfully in this film that to mention these moments first is to affirm the exceptional quality of the picture. There's another point: these moments and some others are proof of a basic assumption. The filmmaker, Miranda July, treats the bizarre moments without bravery or bravado. She assumes that her audience, like herself, is at ease in this era.

July wrote and directed and plays the leading role. She has made short films, performance pieces, and videos, and has published stories in *The Paris Review*. Without much difficulty we can see that *Me and You* is the creation of an artist who has been working outside the common strictures of filmmaking and has now moved, as her unmediated self, into features. This is our good luck.

Before sketching the story (or stories), I note the kinship that this film has with much modern work in all the arts. It begins as if it were completely discarding conventional design and form. July starts discursively: she seems to deal with whatever interests her next. But before long, she adds to the discursive manner—without losing it—some solid story strands. Before the picture is half along, it has become a romantic comedy. Still, it is a long way in texture and tenor from even the less conventional comedies we know (*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, for instance). We can suspect that July is chuckling twice: at her avant-garde friends who were beguiled by her freehand style into following this ultimately symmetrical work, and also at her new general audience, who, after they were ready for arcane art, had convention slipped over on them.

Richard is a shoe salesman at a department store in a bleak Los Angeles district. He is married, and at the start his wife is moving out. They have two sons, the boys mentioned above: Peter, the older, and Robby. It is part of the film's mode that no one ever mentions that this is a biracial marriage: Richard is white, his wife is black, the boys are mocha. Never, now or later, are marital disputes or father-and-child abrasions or neighbors' comments ever touched by racial reference. This is not because of oxygenated liberalism, but because it would be out of key, prosaic, in a picture so extraordinary that a father sets fire to his hand.

Moving along, with the camera always curious about details along the way, we meet Christine, who is an artist trying to place her work in the local center for modern art. Meanwhile she supports herself by using her car as a taxi. She takes a customer, an elderly man, to buy a pair of shoes, and in the shop she meets Richard, by whom she is sexually struck. Though he deals with her only as a cool salesman, she is dazzled. The rest of the film is largely concerned with her attempts to get a response from him. But Richard is still vibrating from wife troubles and is much concerned about his boys. After one of Christine's failed attempts to interest him, she disconsolately scrawls "FUCK" on her windshield as she drives away, and thus the standard movie shot of watching a car's progress through its windshield has an added element.

Less of a subplot than a sexual counterpoint is the story about Rebecca and Heather, two eighteen-year-olds who attract the attention of Andrew, Richard's sales colleague and neighbor. Andrew's way of enticing the girls is to put up salacious placards in the window of his apartment, and, after their fellating practice with Peter, they decide to take Andrew up. But he hides in panic. There is an even younger counterpoint, not sexual though vaguely related to it. Robby makes friends with a girl about his age who is collecting things for her marital hope chest. He contributes. Through much of the above, lazy pillowy music floats along, possibly as if to cushion the fact that only the main story, Christine and Richard, reaches any sort of conclusion.

The acting is all that it needs to be. Heather and Rebecca are Natasha Slayton and Najarra Townsend, who have the unnerving competence of some very young people. This is even truer of Miles Thompson and Brandon Ratcliff as the two sons. The casting of John Hawkes as Richard is obviously part of July's intent to disguise convention. Hawkes is a perfectly good actor, but he is not at all a romantic lead. His face is vulpine. There is more to July's use of him than a proof that non-beautiful people fall in and out of love: she is subverting Romeo requirements.

And there is, somewhat overwhelmingly, July herself. This is scarcely the first time that a leading role has been played by the film's writer-director—let's just mention Woody Allen—but besides the fact that her screenplay's dialogue has a spanking fresh tang throughout, besides the fact that her directing is intimate without crowding, July's performance is startlingly delicate. Personally, she is pleasant without being remarkable, but her performance is fine filigree. It is small-scale work—intelligent glances, subtle inflections, modest gestures—a style that is the fruit of one hundred years of film plus

television. She plays Christine with reticence, convincing us that what we see and hear are only hints of the simmering in this woman.

July's background in the field of avant-garde art has given her a view of film that, since it is joined with remarkable talent, is bracing for the rest of the film world. She treats film personally, idiosyncratically, as presumably she treats her other work; yet, as with some modern art, a gentle, knowing cleverness suffuses it. It seems quite possible that *Me and You* marks the arrival of an artist who may affect—disturbingly yet helpfully—films and audiences to come.

Lila Says

Ziad Doueiri

25 July 2005

Sex can be very helpful. For a screenwriter who wants to treat a subject that might seem insufficiently interesting to some viewers, a strong sexual element can serve as hook and medium. As multiple instances have shown, that sexual element can bring along the background material that may have been the first reason for making the picture. The latest example is *Lila Says*.

The screenplay of this French film is by Ziad Doueiri, who is Lebanese-born and has done a lot of technical work in Hollywood, particularly for Quentin Tarantino. Doueiri has made one previous feature, *West Beirut*, and to judge by it and his latest, his aims in filmmaking could hardly be further from Tarantino's. *Lila Says* is based on a novel whose author is unknown (it wouldn't stagger me to learn that Doueiri wrote it). The story provided the chance to make a film about some of the problems of Muslim young people in France, which was probably the first point of the enterprise, and the sexual element provided a means to make the subject viable in film. At any rate, that is the picture's effect: the sexual element is trenchant, while the status of Muslim youth registers strongly.

Marseilles, today. Chimo is a nineteen-year-old Muslim who, at the start, is trying to record in notebooks the experiences that, in extensive flashback, are the substance of the picture. He lives with his mother, who supports him; his father has run off with a French woman. Their apartment is in the Arab quarter of the city, and, like his three best friends—also Muslims, of course—he is jobless, aimless, bitterly sure that these conditions are his future.

A sixteen-year-old non-Arab girl named Lila, blonde and proud of her blondeness, approaches him one day in a park and quickly proceeds from chat to provocation. Soon she boasts of her body and asks him whether he wants to see her pubis. (O.K., her pussy.) Chimo, for all his inner anger about his status, is a shy youth, reflective, emotionally wary. He doesn't immediately respond, which apparently is what Lila counted on and what, in some sort of presentiment, attracted her to him. The scene ends with Lila

on a swing in the park, riding up high. She is not wearing panties, so Chimo can glimpse what she promised.

They often meet again, sometimes through her arrangement, sometimes through his, and each of their meetings is filled with her torrid accounts of her wild sexual past. These hot tales are clearly meant to tease him, and, though there is one brief sexual moment on her moped, she is almost relying on his innate delicacy to keep him from making moves. Still, in their peculiar, oblique way, this racially diverse pair grows steadily closer and closer.

Chimo's three friends, who have often seen Lila in the streets, have taunted and badgered her, and seem particularly heated because she is blonde and non-Muslim, and therefore would be a special conquest. They know little of Chimo's closeness to her, and they behave explosively toward Lila when they learn of it. In the end our suspicions about Lila's past are confirmed. So is the fate of her curious romance with Chimo. He is left with a roiling emotional legacy, which prompts the scribbling in his notebooks.

Doueiri has cast his film acutely. Chimo is played by Mohammed Khouas, who manages to blend social truculence and a sensitivity that verifies the end of the story. Vahina Giocante is perfect for Lila. She has no conventional sexpot quality: she simply seems an appealing, odd adolescent. Doueiri handles the encounters of this pair with sufficient empathy to make the frank sexual talk seem only the way in which they get to know each other. And he avoids the usual patness of paradoxical love—as when the pair are an Israeli and a Palestinian, a white person and a black person—by making this encounter seem inevitable, given the environment in which Chimo and Lila live. That environment lingers with us after the love story wisps away.

My Summer of Love

Pawel Pawlikowski

25 July 2005

Pawel Pawlikowski is Polish-born but has been living in England for a number of years and has had his directing career there. After some BBC documentaries, he made his first feature, *Last Resort*, about which I remember chiefly its gritty naturalistic texture. So the texture of his new film, *My Summer of Love*—dreamy and shimmery—was surprising.

Naturally a director would want to suit his style to his subject, though it is notable that few distinguished directors have varied widely in style. Each usually chooses subjects that fit his style. In contrast, Pawlikowski seems, in some degree, to have been drawn to this subject because he wanted to change his style.

The screenplay, adapted by the director and Michael Wynne from a novel by Helen Cross, is about two teenage English girls and their summer of emotional growth. The setting is Yorkshire, whose landscape is here celebrated. Mona is a working-class girl

who one day meets the upper-class Tamsin. Opposites do what they are proverbially supposed to do, and the two girls are soon intimate. This intimacy includes meetings in the manor house where Tamsin lives with her family. (Mona lives in a former pub that her evangelical brother has turned into a religious meetinghouse.) The girls' intimacy includes sexual investigation, of course, but the relationship seems almost equally based on Mona's desire to learn from the more widely knowledgeable Tamsin, who tells her about Freud and Nietzsche and Edith Piaf. (Piaf is heard over the closing credits.) For her part, Tamsin seems attracted by, among other things, a stubborn yet tender pride in Mona. The evangelical brother clearly portends some sort of trouble for them. His fervor, which in one aspect leads him to build a gigantic cross and carry it up a hillside with his followers, in another aspect makes him maneuverable to Tamsin. She is able to blunt his threat to her link with Mona.

The girls exchange heated avowals of lifetime love for each other, yet the summer ends as it had to end, as both girls tacitly knew it had to end—and not just because of class distinctions, though certainly they figure. We are left with a concluded lyric whose lyricism depended, in a way, on its conclusion.

Both actresses are talented beyond their years. Tamsin is played by the lovely Emily Blunt, who has a precocious imperial quality. Mona is Natalie Press, who is more homespun in appearance but creates an individual searching for herself, not a type taken from the shelf.

Little in this picture is intrinsically novel: adolescent emotional discoveries are hardly a fresh subject. But the film is emotionally and visually sustained, so it is pleasant, in a long-range sense, to see the story again. The director sometimes urges Ryszard Lenczewski's cinematography toward the arty, yet the film leaves us with the scent of the brisk Yorkshire air and the soft fragrance of inevitable parting.

Saraband

Ingmar Bergman

8 August 2005

In 1973 Ingmar Bergman wrote and directed a six-part television serial called "Scenes from a Marriage" that dealt with the marital experiences of a Stockholm couple named Johan and Marianne. Bergman then condensed the series into a feature film, and in 1981 he made and staged a theater version. In 1983, when he finished *After the Rehearsal*, he said that he would not direct again. He subsequently wrote some screenplays, but others directed them. However, in 2002 Bergman turned again to Johan and Marianne, now thirty years older, and for this postlude to *Scenes*, which he calls *Saraband*, also done for television, he directed as well as wrote. Again he has said he will do no more directing, and as he is now eighty-seven, we can no longer hope for a change of mind.

To watch *Saraband* begin is to feel a surge of happiness. Any qualm that an admirer might have about a tremor in the master's directorial hand is swept away. The Bergman calm surety, the Bergman envelopment of drama in a carapace of quiet, the Bergman gift of immediacy—all these are soon evident. The very making of *Saraband* is one more Bergman marvel.

His hallmarks are notable throughout. At the start, as she did in *Hour of the Wolf*, Liv Ullmann comes in, sits, and addresses us. (Occasionally she speaks to us during the film, thus enlisting us as confidantes.) In an early scene, we hear the ticking of a clock, Bergman's familiar hint about mortality. Later, too, there is a scene in a country church that, with its blend of chill and refuge, reminds us of *Winter Light*. From time to time, as in the past, the camera gently closes in on a speaker as if to suggest that it is convinced about what he or she has been saying.

The editor was Sylvia Ingemarsson, who, among other credits, edited *Fanny and Alexander* in 1982 and is obviously attuned to Bergman's ideas of simplicity and point. The cinematography, too, is at the Bergman level. He used three people from Swedish television who were up to his standard—the painterly without the arty. Per-Olof Lantto, Sofi Stridh, and Raymond Wemmenlöv provide many, many moments that render faces and places as themselves yet also as their quintessence.

The cast? It is hard to use that workaday term about the two leading actors. Would Bergman have undertaken this film if Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson, the original Marianne and Johan, had not been not available? Their very presence, for those who love them, is moving. Despite what we know of other films that these two have done in the last three decades, the effect is almost as if Marianne and Johan, interrupting their lives elsewhere, had consented to return to the screen.

There are only three other actors—one of whom appears in the very last scene and is silent—so once again a Bergman film, in his long homage to his venerated Strindberg, has the feel of a chamber play. Johan has a sixtyish son, Henrik, a musician and professor of music, whose mother was Johan's wife before Marianne. Henrik is the most intricate character in the piece, and Börje Ahlstedt encompasses him. I once saw Ahlstedt as Claudius in Bergman's *Hamlet* and was prepared for his control of complications. Henrik, whose wife has died, has a nineteen-year-old daughter, Karin, whom he is instructing in the cello. She is played by Julia Dufvenius, who, whatever her own age, is here brimming with mercurial nineteen.

Now we arrive at a sadness. The screenplay dissatisfies. Admittedly, it begins with a burden: its antecedent, *Scenes from a Marriage*, is one of the last century's major dramatic works about conjugal life. (The DVD of the full-length original confirms this view wonderfully, as does its screenplay, published in Alan Blair's supple translation.) We can't help expecting an equivalent sequel. But *Saraband* is not only quite different, it is lesser.

Marianne, a lawyer who is still practicing, decides to visit her ex-husband, Johan, a retired professor who lives in a country house. They were divorced more than thirty years earlier. The sheer idea of Marianne's visit is exciting, but from the first moment of their reunion, the pitch wavers. When Marianne wakes Johan, who is dozing over a

book on his veranda, the scene seems like a rough draft of what it ought to have been. Thirty years have passed, yet neither of them comments with much perception or affection on how the other one looks.

After some nestling in quirks and habits, mostly Johan's, the film settles down to its real subject. *Saraband* is almost completely devoted to Henrik's relationship with his daughter and, in some measure, Johan's relationship with both. Henrik, a cellist (and organist and musicologist), is fearful that Karin will leave him. He is a volatile man who, several times, races through a dizzying spectrum of emotions. He loves and bullies Karin. There is even a hint of incest—he and she sleep in the same bed, and one of their kisses is not exactly familial—but nothing is made of it.

Karin is suffering from both his moods and his dependence on her. (So far as we can see, religion is of no special moment to her, yet throughout the film she wears a cross on a chain around her neck. Here again, as with the hinted incest, nothing is made of it.) Family complications deepen because Johan loves her and despises Henrik, and Henrik seethes with hatred of his domineering father. The picture's climax arises out of a possible move in Karin's musical career that would mean departure from her father.

This last fact fixes the film's basic oddity. The climax has nothing to do with Marianne. Very little in the whole story involves her, though she is sometimes an empathic listener. At the beginning, when Marianne decides to revisit Johan, we hope—understandably—for the continuance of their story after a lapse of thirty years. But the picture is not about them: Marianne's visit only provides a means for telling the Johan-Henrik-Karin story. A last scene is tacked on to let Marianne show what she has learned from her visit to Johan, but it has a feeling of belated repair. Further, a photograph of Henrik's wife, Karin's mother, figures prominently in the film and at the end is seen in Marianne's personal photo collection. Why in the world would Marianne have a copy of that photo among her pictures, except to buttress an author's hope for symmetry?

In his preface to the screenplay of *Scenes from a Marriage*, Bergman wrote: "This opus took three months to write, but rather a long part of my life to experience." However long it took him to write *Saraband*, it doesn't reflect much experience of the thirty-year schism in the Marianne-Johan relationship. This is not to argue that an author must literally have experienced what he writes about, but the screenplay of *Saraband* feels concocted, not absorbed from life in sense and soul like so much of Bergman's work. It is as if someone had merely summoned elements—tormented people, mainly—that would make a script in Bergman style. It produces little of the customary awe we feel because he has plumbed what are, or could be, our secrets.

Still—a word that here is richly freighted—the making of the film in itself gives us a last glimpse of a genius.

Broken Flowers

Jim Jarmusch

5 September 2005

Jim Jarmusch's first feature, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984), was unmistakably the work of an ornery, purposeful director who disregarded everything but his intent, which won us to his intent. The film treated the lives of three young Hungarian immigrants with a distanced concern that made me think of Beckett, displaying (to quote myself) "the same patience on the part of tiny individuals toward a huge blundering universe." Some years later I saw the film again and was relieved to like it again, because Jarmusch had since made several weaker pictures. His craggy selfhood, in most of these later films, seemed more like solipsistic prank than ornery dedication.

All these films were independent jobs, though, like Gus Van Sant, Jarmusch sometimes had big names in them, actors seemingly eager for a work holiday away from the factory. Unlike Van Sant, though, he has never been anywhere near Oscar territory. Now, however, Jarmusch pretty decisively joins the big names in their usual habitat. *Broken Flowers* is not a Jarmusch porcupine; it is a moderately domesticated animal.

His screenplay, based on an idea from two other people, is about a middle-aged man revisiting some women in his past. The shape of the film is a reminder of other episodic visits to the past: Duvivier's *Un carnet de bal* (1937), in which a widow looks up men whose names she finds on an old dance card, and Tornatore's *Everybody's Fine* (1990), in which an elderly man visits his five far-flung children. In *Broken Flowers*, a fiftyish stolid bachelor named Don Johnston gets an unsigned typewritten letter from a lover twenty years in the past, saying that he had fathered a son, now nineteen, who is coming to find him. Urged by a friend, Don goes to visit the five most likely women to find out which of them sent the letter and to meet his son.

Jarmusch knew that the film depended hugely on the actor playing the revenant, and here he has done well. Bill Murray is Don, and that fact is almost all that needs to be said about the performance. The secret of Murray's success is that without saying or doing much, he can convince us that his character is wiser, wittier, and sadder than anyone else around him. He brings it off again in *Broken Flowers*.

As for the series of visits that Don makes, they form a set of brief one-act plays in which a woman willy-nilly reveals herself. To each of these women he brings a bouquet. One (Sharon Stone) is a widow, a professional closet organizer with a teenage daughter who parades around in the buff. Warmly welcoming though the widow is, she has no son. Then Frances Conroy plays the wife of a wealthy real estate man who has become her husband in drag. Again, no son. Jessica Lange plays a highly successful animal communicator (not analyst, she insists) who has scant time for Don. No son. Tilda Swinton plays the mate of a rough motorcyclist who is something less than cordial. Some teasing clues here, but no son. The last visit is—had to be—the best. In a cemetery, Don lays his bouquet on a grave.

All these episodes are deftly handled, but ultimately disappointing—doubly. Don is disappointed because he doesn't find out who sent him the anonymous letter, and we are disappointed because the five-part expedition doesn't arrive anywhere. Duvivier's and Tornatore's films have underlying views that are dramatized. *Broken Flowers* is just a set of sketches. At the end, Don's encounter with a teenage backpacker in his hometown shows how far his inquiry has affected him, but it concludes nothing. The five episodes in *Broken Flowers* are good enough to make us expect that the picture has a theme, but it hasn't.

It just leaves us wondering. Which of these women sent the letter and whether there really is a son are questions that Jarmusch doesn't answer. Worse than that, he doesn't suggest that the absence of answers is the point of the picture. The possibility of the past becoming mysterious long after one has left it is intriguing, but Jarmusch misses this basic idea, or any other, and simply focuses on the five visits themselves.

Keane

Lodge Kerrigan

19 September 2005

Keane is extraordinary—vivid, stripped, intense. A thirtyish man named William Keane is searching for his six-year-old daughter who was abducted in the New York Port Authority bus terminal a few months before the film begins. At the start he is burrowing around the terminal with a newspaper clipping about the abduction, complete with photo, asking almost everyone he meets if he or she has seen this child. Immediately we can't help being seized. Very soon we are differently seized. A man asking this question months after the event is someone who has clearly passed the rational; and we know why—or think we do.

The film was written and directed by Lodge Kerrigan, who has made two previous pictures (unseen by me). He works with such lean force that we are plunged into the story's emotional center as if we had suddenly been cast into a whirlpool. His collaborator—the best term—is his leading actor, Damian Lewis, who is English but whose American accent is flawless. Lewis's sculpted face, unobtrusively sensitive, his inflections of speech that suggest Keane's complexity, are exactly the qualities that Kerrigan needed for this man whose companionship in hell we must accept.

Keane lives in a cheap hotel room, subsists, as far as we see, on whiskey and cocaine, knows two women with whom he has hot encounters, and views himself as consecrated to this search, regardless of the facts. Down the hall in his seedy hotel lives a young woman who has a daughter about the age of Keane's daughter, and Keane gets to know both. This occurrence of the vicarious child seems at first a bit too neat, but as the film progresses, the neatness is folded under. We see that, far from settling matters, the other child only feeds the story's essence—which is, or becomes, ambiguity.

Fairly soon in the film we suspect that Keane may never have had a daughter—we never actually see the clipping. He may, knowingly or not, have merely imagined this cross on which to crucify himself. He may be a man who, seeing the world and himself as they are, has in a Dostoevskyan surge fated himself to suffer. The friendship with the neighbor's little girl leads to another large ambiguity. At the end there are two possibilities facing him. The choice is left open.

This double ambiguity fits Kerrigan's theme. His film enters a realm where all the details—the furniture, the streets, the lights—could not be more veristic, but Keane moves through this real world like someone who is not quite a citizen. John Foster's handheld camera supports this doubleness subtly. A special word of thanks to Abigail Breslin, the little girl, who is both reticent and close, and a further word of thanks to Kerrigan for bringing us Lewis. The actor is in every scene and almost every shot and is compelling throughout.

Brokeback Mountain

Ang Lee

16 January 2006

Ang Lee continues to astonish. In 1995, when his best-known film was *Eat Drink Man Woman*, set in his native Taiwan, the producers of *Sense and Sensibility* tapped him to direct their picture: an act of perception, of courage, for which all of us owe them thanks. Lee proceeded—incredibly—to make the best of the Jane Austen films. He then went on to make five more pictures, among which were two ultra-American ones, *The Ice Storm*, about Connecticut suburbanites, and *Ride with the Devil*, about the Civil War.

Both of those films, whatever their other qualities, were made with societal comprehension. The fact that Lee was educated in theater and film at American universities must of course have much to do with his American ease. Now he shows it again in *Brokeback Mountain*, which deals with the American West in the twentieth century, and now we owe even more thanks to the producers who launched him on his unique career. (One of those producers worked on this new picture.)

The screenplay by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, based on a story by Annie Proulx, is about two cowboys who are lovers. In 1963 in Wyoming, two ranch hands named Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist are hired to spend the winter tending a thousand sheep up on Brokeback Mountain. (Shepherds though they are, through much of the film they call each other “cowboy,” and we do see them later with cattle.) Ennis and Jack had not known each other previously, and they don't spend a lot of time together now. Ennis sleeps somewhere off near the sheep, and Jack bunks in a pup tent. One inclement night, however, they share the tent. There has not been the slightest hint of physical attraction between them, nor is there now as they bed down together. During the night, however, they find themselves—the phrase is apt—having sex.

In the morning they are their customary laconic selves as they go about their jobs, but they are both marked for life—by love. They have sex together again up in the mountains. Later on, through the years, they continue to meet as often as they can, even though in time both of them marry. The film traces their torment when separated, their happiness at reunions, and their near-pride in their private selves. Their marriages are not blissful—Ennis’s wife indeed has seen the two men kissing—but they seem to accept marital trouble as part of the world’s harassment of their truth.

The delicacy and pain and almost unbearable joy of the pair, though given to us through the actors, began with Lee, I believe—his vision of Ennis and Jack. He apparently sees their relationship as double. One part is the basic human lot, their immersion in a general current of emotional need that seems to flood around all men and women, that looks for reification, for person and place, in one or another sort of gender relationship. The second part is more specific: the morning after their first experience, Ennis and Jack virtually decide that they must be in love. They specify to each other that they are not “queer,” but the condition that allows them to be themselves without shame is to believe that they are in love. This is a matter far from fakery. They are as truly in love as two people can be, but they are grateful for it because this spiritual union licenses them to continue their occasional beddings, and helps to justify each man to himself.

Their story does not finish as they might have wished: it couldn’t, given the world in which they live. But their relationship from beginning to end has a finespun texture that is, I’d guess, the result of Lee’s vision. His treatment of their love is so affirmed yet gentle that it seems, more than the story, the purpose for which he made the film.

The landscape in which most of it takes place is majestic, thrilling. It was actually shot in the Canadian Rockies, and the cinematographer, Rodrigo Prieto, presents the scenic marvels to us like resplendent gifts. The interweaving of the grand landscape with the intimate story has a peculiar synesthetic effect: it almost transmutes into music, Beethoven perhaps, in which great chords shape the cosmos through which a poignant lyrical theme winds.

Brokeback Mountain does not contain the slightest suggestion that its purpose is to chronicle a case or a social problem. (It has provoked a blizzard of articles on the subject of cowboy homosexuality, most of them paying little attention to the film’s art.) It simply treasures two human beings who, unlikely as we may have thought it for these men, find themselves fixed in a discomfiting yet thorough passion. They inhabit a world that vaunts macho masculinity; nonetheless they seem secretly fortified by their fate.

The two leading actors are superb. Merely to remember their performances is to be moved again. Ennis is played by Heath Ledger, an Australian who has mastered Western accent and bearing. He gives Ennis a solidity through which his new experience shivers like a crack through a rock. (An extrinsic fact to whet appetite: Ledger has just appeared in a film as Casanova.) It seems possible that, even allowing for the messiness of almost any acting career, Ledger may be on his way to the heights. Jack is Jake Gyllenhaal, who, in an odd way, has been slipping quietly into prominence. His performances in *Proof* and *Jarhead* hardly went unnoticed, but his Jack makes us realize that we have been

watching the emergence of something more than a usable young leading man. As Jack, he creates a dogged sensitivity, a man who has not lived by emotional finesse but now finds himself capable of it and will not relinquish it.

Lee's part in these performances? In the diary that Emma Thompson kept while making *Sense and Sensibility*, she wrote: "I am constantly astounded by Ang—his taste is consummate. It sometimes takes a while to work out exactly what he wants but it's always something subtler." It seems highly likely that Ledger and Gyllenhaal could say the same.

So in all the tumult about this film, the eruption of its subject into wide attention and the consequent revelations about cowboys' lives in the past, let us—without forgetting the American sources of the screenplay—acknowledge the anomaly that the director is Chinese. Where his mind and imagination will take Lee next I do not yet know, but I certainly want to follow.

Fateless

Lajos Koltai

6 March 2006

Many of us have reservations about the Holocaust as a subject for enacted films. Claude Lanzmann, who made the monumental documentary *Shoah*, said, "Fiction [about the Holocaust] is a transgression. I deeply believe that there are some things that cannot and should not be represented." Still, even if we too think that we believe this, when a Holocaust film is manifestly serious—one can almost say consecrated—it is hard to resist. Resistance can even be a kind of sloth.

Reservations thus fall away. *Fateless*, an enacted film, is a pressing instance. It contains little that will be new to any informed viewer; yet it fascinates for all of its 140 minutes. Partly this is because the screenplay is by Imre Kertész, adapted by this Hungarian author from his novel of the same name. (Kertész, not quite incidentally, is a Nobel laureate.) The book is based on his own experiences beginning in German-occupied Budapest. In 1944, when he was fourteen, Kertész, who is Jewish, was deported to Auschwitz and was subsequently moved from the death camp to labor camps. He was liberated in 1945 and returned to Budapest. This outline of his own story is also an outline of the film. So we have here a work grounded in fact that has gone through two transformative artistic phases, fiction and film. It is at least an exception to, if not a rebuttal of, Lanzmann's statement.

We rely on the makers of this film—or any film on this subject—to use art as service, not exploitation; and throughout any such picture, we can be nervous about sentimentality, facileness. *Fateless* never falters. Every moment in it is treated as a unit of trust: The subject seems to be depending on the gravity, let alone the talent, of those who are exploring it.

Lajos Koltai, well known as a cinematographer (*Mephisto*, *Colonel Redl*), here makes his directing debut. He is marvelously concerned with faces. Throughout the film, long shots and panoramas, particularly of the prisoners en masse, recur as reminders of context; but principally Koltai wants his film to have its being in the faces of the boy and of all those he encounters. Every face becomes at least a minute biography. And Koltai gives the film an overall album effect by closing almost every scene with a quick fade instead of a sharp cut.

Inevitably enough, he has chosen an excellent cinematographer, Gyula Pados, and together they have provided *Fateless* with a visual texture in limbo. The palette is muted, so that the film seems, most of the time, to hover between color and black-and-white. Color in the camp scenes would have been upsetting; colors in the beginning or the end would have made it a movie. Throughout, the very palette conveys an aura of captivity.

Exceptional as these factors are, the film depended firstly and finally on the boy who plays the fourteen-year-old Gyuri. Marcell Nagy may or may not have a future as an actor, and may not even want one, but whatever happens to him later, he is fixed here in a being, a completeness, that will last. With the help of Koltai, to be sure, this boy creates from within. He never obeys the director, he never acts, he never wants to overwhelm us. When he needs to look into the camera, he tells us that the camera is not there: he is moving through an enclosing reality. It is extraordinary to be so convinced by a juvenile actor without any sense of an exceptional performance. Nagy is given a good deal of voice-over narration as connective tissue, and it too sounds true with an almost casual truth.

The extensive cast is flawless. As with Nagy, most of them seem committed, rather than cast. One curiosity: the next James Bond, Daniel Craig, who was visible in *Munich*, appears near the end as an American sergeant, Jewish, who wants to help the boy. Gyuri's refusal to be helped, his insistence on returning to Hungary, is part of his state of mind when he returns to Budapest, a state that will not completely surprise those familiar with Primo Levi.

Fateless had its American premiere at the Film Forum in New York and is now being shown in various cities around the country. Among its virtues, it is an assurance to those of us who may fear that the Holocaust is becoming a film genre. A film as truthful, in every sense, as *Fateless* bursts through genre bounds to become itself.

Battle in Heaven

Carlos Reygadas

13 March 2006

If a film begins with an explicit act of fellatio, it is probably not porn. A porn director would tease a while, not put the act right at the beginning. If it occurs at the start, the film is probably a serious work, promptly signaling to us that it will scorn convention.

Such is the case with *Battle in Heaven*, a Mexican film written and directed by Carlos Reygadas. He has much more sex in store for us, and it is always explicit, but he makes these scenes part of his theme, not bursts of sensationalism. Reygadas, whose second picture this is, is said to have said that narrative is merely a marketing necessity for a film, not integral. This view, curiously like that of some nineteenth-century opera composers who merely wanted plot armatures on which to hang their arias, could not be more clearly expressed than in *Battle in Heaven* (a title, by the way, that passeth understanding). Many of the things we see, and not just the sex, are more affecting than the almost haphazard story that connects them.

Marcos, a married middle-aged potbellied chauffeur for a general in Mexico City, is having an affair with the general's young daughter, Ana, who is also having an affair with a young man and is also amusing herself with occasional work in a bordello. This last touch may suggest Buñuel, but *Battle in Heaven* has none of the progressive tension of Buñuel. Events are simply chronicled, slowly, and often with atmospheric excursions. (For instance, during one sex scene, the camera does a slow tour of the empty courtyard of the apartment house in which the sex is happening and then returns to the couple.)

The chauffeur—and his wife, who is more obese than he—have kidnapped a baby for ransom, and the child has been accidentally killed. They regard this as regrettable but not catastrophic, one more grim fact in a life of grim facticity. We are treated to a sex scene with this plump pair, too, as part of Reygadas's scheme of anti-glamour dailiness. Eventually their crime and another crime crack Marcos's near-stolidity. Near the end he joins a devout Catholic procession to a cathedral, moving along on his knees.

If all the above sounds sententious, even slightly ludicrous, it is all the more odd because Reygadas is a director of quite perceptible talent. His treatment of the bizarre as commonplace eventually spins a mild hypnosis in us. After a while we even accept in some degree his lengthy contemplation of his characters' faces, which are almost like rests in music. And Reygadas can comment without italics: for instance, near the beginning Marcos, in his security jacket, ambles along after a parade of snappy Mexican soldiers at the morning flag ceremony, and his ambling is in itself a comment on the snappiness.

Reygadas makes a (publicized) point of using non-professional performers. Marcos, we're told, is an actual chauffeur; Ana is played, under an assumed name, by the daughter of a well-known family. This non-professionalism has led to comparisons with Bresson that seem to me strained. Bresson wanted to supersede acting, which he loathed. Reygadas is more like the Italian neorealists who wanted acting, but from non-actors. His people do well enough what they are meant to do. Any depth comes not from their performances but from the director's use of them as units in a sort of non-morality play, a blend of the ordinary and extraordinary into indiscriminating existence. The very grotesquerie of this combination, even the very *longueurs* in the film, have an effect. We may indeed yawn a bit from time to time, but we know that we are yawning in the presence of a director who is intelligently disturbed by the moral inertia he sees around him and whose future is worth watching.

A sidebar curiosity. How does a director engage people for roles like Marcos and Ana? These people are not porn professionals. He must tell candidates, presumably unacquainted with each other, that they are to have various kinds of sex on camera. Sex is hardly novel now in films, but most of the time it is ultimately simulated. I can remember very few scenes in which it is as explicit as it is here. I can't help wondering what the conversations were like between Reygadas and the people he interviewed.

Woman Is the Future of Man

Hong Sang-soo

3 April 2006

What happens next? This question has been the dynamics of stories ever since stories began. Allow for a few flurries of difference along the way, and that prime question has prevailed through the ages until the last century. In the introduction to *The Other American Drama*, a book that deals with the twentieth century, Marc Robinson writes: "In their own highly individual ways, each of the writers discussed here turns his or her attention away from plots, reducing their importance or eliminating them altogether, and rediscovers the essential elements of dramatic form—language, gesture, presence." I would venture that this reduction by playwrights—and latterly by filmmakers—has even more to do with social perception than with aesthetic revision. Increasingly, dramatists and filmmakers are less concerned with what their characters do next, and more concerned with the fact that, in any deeply committed sense, those characters don't really know what to do next. Or at any rate are not bursting to do it. This suspension, during which the characters must live and somehow function, has been the pith of more and more films, many of them from abroad. Here now is one from Korea.

Woman Is the Future of Man is the fifth feature written and directed by Hong Sang-soo (b. 1960), but only the second to be shown in this country. The two main characters in his film, set in and around Seoul today, behave as if their lives have direction: one is a filmmaker trained in America, the other an art teacher at a local university, and each in his way has career projects in mind. But Hong knows more about these young men than they know about themselves. They make some moves in the picture, but the shape and pace of the film murmur otherwise—these men's lives are emptier than they are willing to acknowledge.

At the start the filmmaker meets with his old friend the art teacher, who takes him to a restaurant where they sit at a table, eat, drink, and talk for five or six minutes—in one shot, unedited, unvaried. What the two men reveal about their pasts, especially in regard to the same young woman, connects with their relationship and plans, but the very persistence of the shot itself is Hong's overriding comment. He is telling us that the two men are static—not in their visible careers but in their most private beings. Hong uses this held-shot device again, with these two and with others: it is his means to depict stasis.

External action occurs, as the two men part and meet again and go out on impromptu parties. Sex—with the woman earlier discussed and with others—happens several times in several ways, but the sex seems the fulfillment of social routine by the participants, rather than heat. (During one encounter, the woman actually asks the man, “Can I moan?”) Everything personal that occurs in the film seems casual, spontaneous, a mimesis of inner beings that are covered with a patina of purpose.

The danger in Hong’s procedure is obvious. Dramatists learned long ago that it is risky to include a static character because he may so easily bore the audience. (To see how a static character can be used dramatically, look at Giulia in Antonioni’s *L’Avventura*.) Hong is not entirely successful here. His two young men are touched by tedium from time to time: we wait a bit impatiently for the next cigarette or the next desultory chat with a woman. But most of the time we are held by a conviction that Hong not only knows what he is risking, he is doing it for a grave contemporary purpose. He is one of the many artists these days who are contravening traditional structure as they attempt to depict a widespread malaise. They certainly are not all good artists merely because of this interest: but some of them are, and all of them are disquietingly significant.

L’Enfant (The Child)

Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne

10 April 2006

In 1996, with their third fiction feature, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne stepped into the front rank of world cinema. For twenty years these Belgian brothers had been making documentaries, sixty of them, for European television. Then, for whatever (blessed) reason, they began making fiction films. The first two of these have not been released here. The third, *La Promesse*, which deals with a Belgian adolescent struggling free of the dog-eat-dog ethics of his father, was immediately recognized as a star in the film firmament.

The brothers seemed to find it miraculously easy to be first-rate; and they have continued so. How comforting it has been through the last ten years to remember that they are working, that two filmmakers of our time have such gifts of spiritual scope and unembarrassed compassion and have the art to present their insights simply, almost humbly. Their next film, *Rosetta*, about an adolescent working-class girl’s abrasions with the world, was not quite at the transcendent *Promesse* height, but it grew from the same impulses and craft. Then came *The Son*, in which a carpenter learns that his new young apprentice, lately released from prison, is the thief who murdered his child. The profundity of this film, taciturn yet overwhelming, suggested some sort of kinship with nineteenth-century Russian masters.

Inevitably, the approach of a new Dardennes film evokes both eagerness and fear—that it may not reach their accustomed level. *L’Enfant (The Child)*, as it is being called,

is thus doubly welcome. It rewards the eagerness, and it sweeps away any worry about its quality. The brothers have given us another treasure. Once again they have made a drama of redemption, and once again they convince us that it is possible.

The place is a Belgian industrial city. The first shot is of a young woman carrying an infant up a flight of dingy stairs. Only after the film is finished can we recognize that this image—a new life being carried to its future—is a muted hint of its theme. The young woman, Sonia, has just been released from the hospital, where she bore the child, and she is now looking for the father, Bruno. She soon finds him—he couldn't meet her because he was busy with a robbery—and he welcomes both of them with all the warmth of which he is capable.

Bruno and Sonia, attractive, young, truly mated, are thieves. They live in criminality as fish live in water. They fuss over their baby, they play and tease in the park as any other young couple might. Yet Bruno's main activity at the moment is to use schoolboys of twelve or so to steal from places where he cannot go and to pay them off. Money pressures harass him heavily, and one day, while Sonia is busy, he arranges to sell their baby for considerable profit to a gang that specializes in illegal adoptions. Bruno's rationale, more a matter of excuse than belief, is that the money will enable him and Sonia to survive: they can have another child. He tells her what he has done: then the camera cuts to her on the ground, where she has fainted. (The moment is much like the one in *The Son* when the carpenter tells his wife that his new assistant is the fellow who killed their child.)

Unexpectedly riven, Bruno manages to recover the baby from the adoption gang and repays the money that they gave him. He brings the infant back to Sonia; she seizes the child, leaves Bruno, and ignores his subsequent plea for forgiveness. Part of his penance, which she does not know, is that he still owes the adoption crooks a lot of money in return for what they would have had from the baby's purchaser, and they have threatened him. They give him a sample of what they will do if he doesn't come through.

Desperate, Bruno recruits one of his schoolboy accomplices, Steve, to steal for him. Things get jammed. They are forced to flee from the police together. They plunge into a river to hide under a dock, but Steve flounders and Bruno has to save him from drowning. The Dardennes, always concerned with adult-youngster relations, thus use Steve as a vicar for Bruno's baby. The rescue is a selfless, dangerous act. Bruno is nudged through emergency toward transformation.

Arrest and prison soon follow for him. In fact, prison is a sort of haven from the men to whom he owes money. The last scene, which protocol forbids me to describe, fulfills both the story and the theme, yet without the slightest touch of neatness. The sense is that prices have been paid for this ending. It is earned. Something has happened to the world in which Bruno and Sonia have been living.

The Dardennes have two colleagues who work with them on all their features. The editor, Marie-Hélène Dozo, understands the urgent economy in the brothers' work—not one instant too much or too little. The cinematographer, Alain Marcoen, renders the

grainy city unremittingly. And, under the brothers' guidance, he dollies along in shot after shot, making movement, velocity, space components of the drama.

That unshowy yet astonishingly effective actor Olivier Gourmet, who had large roles in the previous Dardennes pictures, here proves his fealty to the brothers with a brief appearance as a detective. Sonia is the debut film role for Déborah François, but it doesn't seem so. François creates the young woman with the force of her concentration, belief, commitment. Bruno is Jérémie Renier, who was wonderfully compelling as the boy in *La Promesse* and who, nine years later, again compels wonderfully as a young man living by standards that happen not to be those of the world in general.

The Dardenne brothers apparently have one overriding concern with their actors, akin less to Bergman than to Antonioni (two names that are not inappropriate here). Bergman, a master of theater as well as film, leads us to admire his actors' art even while they are creating it. Antonioni, though certainly not content with facile verism, wants his actors to disappear while they create. So, too, the Dardennes. They see the world as it is but more so. They see what we may sense is there but don't always perceive. For their perceptions, their persistence, their very modesty, we can be grateful.

Edmond

Stuart Gordon

7 August 2006

David Mamet is the most versatile American dramatist working today. This is not because he writes for the theater and the screen and television: more relevantly, he ranges widely in style. Mamet characteristics can be seen in all those styles, but they are used to strike different chords. Look only at some of the plays that have been filmed. *American Buffalo*, set in a junk shop, slithers along in a mire of ultravernacular diction as if swimming through muck to self, and to self-justification. *Oleanna*, set in a university office, is written with verbal surgery that reveals buried motives. *Glengarry Glen Ross* uses salesmen's lingo turned oddly lyrical. Yet all these scripts are inarguably the work of the same man.

Now one of my favorite Mamet plays, *Edmond*, first produced in 1982, arrives on screen and, among other things, shows again the scope of Mamet's styles. *Edmond* is a long one-act play that takes a very ordinary man—forty-seven years old, dully employed, dully married, even dully despondent—as he manages to break loose from dullness and, seeking reality, encounters more than he can readily deal with. And it is written in what I can only call German Expressionist style.

When I first read *Edmond*, I thought immediately of the flower of that Expressionist school, Georg Kaiser's *From Morn to Midnight*. The critic H. F. Garten wrote of Kaiser's play:

It is a *Stationen* drama, depicting a man's evolution in a succession of stages . . . In the course of twelve hours, he hurries through various stages, in a frantic quest for a new and intense experience of life.

Mamet's play covers more than twelve hours, but it is also a *Stationen* drama, using much of the same minimalist dialogue with occasional explosions, and composed of a series of "stages," rather than scenes, in which a man desperately searches for new intensity.

On his way home from work, low on spiritual fuel, Edmond stops at a clairvoyant's. (Clairvoyants recur in Mamet: see *The Shawl*.) She reads tarot cards and tells him, "You are not where you belong." Imagined tarot cards fleck his mind thereafter. The result of the clairvoyant's counsel comes that evening. At home, after some staccato dialogue with his wife about a broken lamp, Edmond gets up and says he is going.

Wife: Will you bring me back some cigarettes . . .

Edmond: I'm not coming back.

This simple statement fractures the somnolence of his life: a quick quarrel discloses that he hasn't loved his wife for years and doesn't think she's attractive. Mamet, who wrote this screen adaptation, puts the wife in bra and panties in this scene—apparently to emphasize Edmond's lack of interest.

He leaves. His first stop is a bar, where he has an intimate conversation with a stranger, played by a Mamet familiar, Joe Mantegna. (The bar intimacy itself is a harbinger of *Glengarry Glen Ross*.) Edmond gets a tip on how to slake his sexual needs. In the strip club that he goes to, his very naiveté about prices and custom protects him for a while, but only for a while. His descent into desire continues in a peep show, where again his unfamiliarity with ritualized sin does him in. Encounters with three-card monte players on the street leave him bruised and quite broke. He goes to a pawnshop and, without any such plan, acquires a knife. He uses it on a marauding pimp.

At last Edmond goes home with a bar girl, Glenna, played by the winning Julia Stiles. They make love, then they talk earnestly about themselves—and about possibilities. But the fever of his quest for reality, which has been burning through everything he has been doing, propels him past the rational into the hierophantic, the exalted, the "truth." This truth, which is merely a grotesque compound of his lifelong frustrations, exploding on this night in sex and prejudice and impossible demands, leads to murder.

Edmond ends in prison. A big black man is put into his cell and beats Edmond into granting him sexual favors. In the last scene, the two men are simply living together affectionately. (Edmond is presumably in jail for life.) In the evening he kisses the other man good night before he turns over and goes to sleep.

Thus Edmond's pilgrimage has led him from a mechanized existence into flurries of sexual adventure that he had apparently been fantasizing about throughout his life, and then to the furthest extreme of violence—all construed as a search for reality, for self. And he ends in an unforeseen domesticity, enforced but safe—perhaps another secret he

has contained for forty-seven years and is just discovering. Mamet's theme is not that we all share Edmond's particular frustrations and hungers, but that we all have them in one form or another and can be interested in a man who discovers his own.

Mamet has, as far as I can tell, kept every line of dialogue that was in the play. But incisive though the film is, it misses the formal effect of the original. In the play, the twenty-three brief scenes follow one another like separate glimpses of a journey, a sort of mobile slide show (the Expressionist *Stationen*). In the film, Mamet uses connective tissue. For example, when Edmond arrives in prison, he is taken down a corridor of cells with other convicts jeering and yelling at him. In the play, his wife ends her visit to him in prison; then we can almost hear a click, the scene ends, and with another such inaudible click, Edmond is in his cell with the black man. No journey down the corridor. The play is like a profane medieval morality play, presenting stages of a pilgrimage. The film is more of a narrative stream. Thus the formality of the play, which is part of its quality, is diluted.

The director, Stuart Gordon, first worked with Mamet in Chicago in 1974 and has since made a name with horror films. Only one touch here—a blood spray—belongs in a horror film: otherwise, Gordon deals fittingly with the script. He has to contend, however, with one of Mamet's favorite actors, William H. Macy. I have never seen a bad Macy performance and have never seen one that I relished. (Well, perhaps the schemer in *Fargo*.) Edmond is the center of this piece, a role created for a virtuoso. In fact, as the play/film proceeds, we can almost see the adjectives gathering around the actor's head—"brilliant," etc.—even if the performance is merely passable. Macy never sets a foot wrong, or especially right. He is as authentic as he can be in all the shades of the role. Still, we rarely sense the Edmond in whom all these feelings have been repressed for decades and who is now both maniacally gleeful and pitifully frightened by the bursting of the dam. What the role needs, and what Macy cannot quite provide, is the sense not of a robot but of a potent man who has been imprisoned by rote. Remember Jack Nicholson in *About Schmidt*.

The Bridesmaid

Claude Chabrol

14 August 2006

Going to a new Chabrol film these days is like sitting down with an old friend who will tell you another one of his stories. Chabrol has been making films since 1958: the latest of his more than fifty features is *The Bridesmaid*, and another one has already been finished. He has co-written or co-adapted many of his pictures, and he has also played bit parts in some of them (as well as in the films of others). I have seen a lot of Chabrol's films, and many others must share my sense that much of my filmgoing life is threaded throughout with his work. He has always been a director who felt that moving ahead

was at least as important as polishing a single work. This has sometimes let him present less than his best, but the sheer sweep of his career warmly compensates.

By now a Chabrol film has become something of a family affair. His wife, Aurore, was the script supervisor of *The Bridesmaid*; one son, Thomas, plays a small part; another son, Matthieu, wrote the score; his stepdaughter, Cécile Maistre, was the first assistant director. Chabrol's career even began in family style. In the 1950s, his first wife inherited some money. The two of them were then able to produce his first picture, *Le Beau Serge*, and they also helped to launch what became, with Chabrol as a leader, the New Wave.

Early on, too, he showed his chief thematic interest. With Eric Rohmer—and before either of them had begun directing features—he wrote a book on Hitchcock. Much more than with Rohmer, the Hitchcock influence has often been discussed in regard to Chabrol's work because he is so continually concerned with crime and guilt and shadowed lives.

Obviously among so many films by one man there are variations in quality. An occasional picture, like his *Madame Bovary*, has been a dud. On the other hand, Chabrol has reached such heights—or should one say depths?—as *This Man Must Die*, about a man who hunts down the hit-and-run driver who killed his small son, and *Landru*, based on the same character as Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux*.

The Bridesmaid ranks high in the Chabrol roster. The first two minutes affirm his mastery. The film opens with a ride down a seaside street in an uninteresting neighborhood that ends at a house in front of which stand some people and a television reporter. She tells us of a crime that has been committed there. As she talks, the image converts into the screen of a television set, and the camera pulls back into the living room of some people who are watching. Thus, gently, we are reminded that crime is ready to appear anywhere, at any time, and that this imminence is nowadays a subliminal part of ordinary lives. In our minds, that opening becomes increasingly freighted as the film unfolds.

This is the home of Christine, a widowed hairdresser in her fifties, and her three children. Philippe, in his late twenties, is an executive in a construction firm; Sophie, twenty-three, is soon to be married; Patricia is a typically “difficult” adolescent. All of them are going to dinner that evening with Christine's boyfriend, Gérard, a man in his fifties, and Christine asks if she may give Gérard the life-size sculptured head of a woman in their garden that her friend has admired. All agree, so they take it along, and we can be sure that this head will figure in what is to come. (The closing credits roll over that head.)

Subtle touches abound. Early instance: Gérard had not expected Christine to bring her children to dinner. When they arrive, he swiftly closes the door to the dining room where a table has been set and takes them all to a restaurant. That swift door-closing is characterization by cinematic means.

At Sophie's wedding Philippe meets Senta, the bridegroom's cousin, who is a bridesmaid. (She adopted her name from *The Flying Dutchman*.) She is quiet but not reticent.

This is quickly demonstrated when she follows Philippe home—he had to leave the wedding early—and very soon maneuvers him into bed.

Their affair continues at Senta's house, which she owns. Though it is large, she lives in the crummy basement. On the floor above, her stepmother, a dance teacher, practices the tango with her partner; above that are large rooms filled with white-sheeted furniture. Senta's cool-hot intensity, the force with which she tells Philippe that she has been waiting for him all her life, that she loved him at first sight, is intoxicating to Philippe and lifts him to her state of passion. In the course of time she recounts, truthfully or not, her lurid past in other countries. She says that she is now a would-be actress in (nearby) Paris and that, when she can't get acting work, she poses for porn photos. He accepts all these matters as part of her unique being.

After they are deeply involved with each other, Senta tells Philippe that they have reached the plane where each of them must kill someone to prove the sublimity of their love. This pseudo-Nietzschean formula, elevating them beyond good and evil, at first amuses him. But she is serious, and he is so fevered to please her that he pretends compliance. Next day a murder is committed down on the docks, and, using it as a convenience, he boasts to her that he did it. She believes him. She then feels that she must fulfill her obligation.

The screenplay, adapted by Pierre Leccia and Chabrol from a novel by Ruth Rendell, dramatizes intoxication by passion—how it can take lovers, particularly when one of them is already quite strange, into places that had been unimaginable. Chabrol surrounds this affair with the quite mundane troubles of Philippe's family, and these troubles have a double effect. They seem small compared with his consuming affair with Senta, and they also seem precious as fingerholds on normalcy. Chabrol also makes a character out of Senta's weird house itself, where the tango sometimes goes on above the darkening lovers.

Chabrol insured the power of this dangerously difficult film with perfect casting. The two lovers are so well acted that their story—and its finish—are incredibly convincing. Benoît Magimel, who was Isabelle Huppert's young lover in *The Piano Teacher*, gives heat to all the shades of feeling that come Philippe's way. Laura Smet, unbeautiful but sexy, creates a Senta who is driven by forces that she can't control and is glad of it. Charming Aurore Clément plays Philippe's mother, just good enough to be true. Matthieu Chabrol's score winds enticing filaments of sound through the film.

Chabrols, onward! Send us your next picture, please, along with word that you are making another.

The Departed

Martin Scorsese

30 October 2006

Of course Martin Scorsese has varied interests—remember *The Age of Innocence* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*—but it seems fair to say that his chief subject is crime. He was reared in Manhattan's Little Italy, where, he has said, "There were two kinds of people who commanded respect, apart from parents. There were the mini-godfathers, who controlled the neighborhood, and the priests." His films have dealt less with the priests. Conditioned by what he saw and heard back then, Scorsese has long been looking at crime from the inside out. Now he enlarges perspective. In his new film, *The Departed*, he looks at criminal doings from the viewpoints of both criminals and police.

The chance to do this came from a Hong Kong film called *Infernal Affairs*, the plot of which was built on a double deceit. A crime boss puts a youngster in the police academy so that the new policeman can eventually be of use to him, and a police-academy graduate is assigned to undercover work in a criminal gang. *The Departed*, derived from the Hong Kong film, is set in Boston and focuses on a detective squad in the Massachusetts State Police, possibly because Scorsese wanted to rummage among Irish-American Catholics for a change.

The symmetrical plot device may make the story sound overly neat. If only it were. William Monahan's screenplay is so full of cryptic pronouncements and swift portentous scenes that neatness is blown away. Scorsese was apparently concerned with the idea of identity, one of the ancient themes of drama, and how it affects one's actions, emotions, self-knowledge, even dreams. But his film is so frantic with plot jabs and counterjabs that the gravity of the theme is blurred in cop-and-criminal sorties. Even Scorsese's usually gleaming direction is dulled to the "Law & Order" level, except for a few of his famous traveling shots.

Some subplots wind through. Both young men get involved with a police-department shrink. She is an attractive young woman, presumably because that was the only way Scorsese and the producers could get a woman into the cast. Further mechanics: there is a scene in which the crime boss and his gang sell stolen military stuff to Chinese agents, a scene that must be No. 2,150 in the roster of heavily armed shady business deals. (The ace was the weapons deal in *The Wild Bunch*.)

As the criminals' stooge and the undercover cop, Matt Damon and Leonardo DiCaprio labor along like honest workmen doing their jobs—no flaws, no flourishes. Mark Wahlberg barks continuously as the staff sergeant of the detective squad. Martin Sheen is thoughtful as the squad captain, the only character in the picture whose language is not soaked in raunch. (Perhaps Sheen and others thought that such diction would be out of place for a former president of the United States, even a fictional one from television's "The West Wing.") Vera Farmiga, as the shrink, is pleasant.

The overarching menace of the piece is Jack Nicholson, who virtually repeats his Joker in *Batman*. What a masterly performance that was: an outsize balletic rendition of

a mythic figure, far past the imaginative reach of any other current American film actor. And how wrong that style is in this realistic picture. The crime boss whom Nicholson plays simply cannot stop acting. He cannot leave any gesture, any phrase, unadorned. It is hard to see how this slightly ridiculous performer could have held power for so long. Surely some aspirant would have seen his foolishness as a possible danger and scuttled him.

At the finish, the film's title looks a bit comic. Hardly anyone we have met in the picture has not departed. Killing is so common that we can only wonder how any of these characters survived long enough to finish their story.

Is Scorsese desperate? This screenplay has the scent of it, as if he is scraping for material to feed his basic filmic interests. But the risk in this case—not evaded—was that his need led him close to painful strain. I can't remember another Scorsese moment as shockingly banal as the finishing touch here. We look out the window of the stooge's luxe apartment, past his terrace. Then a rat comes out and plays on the terrace railing. Well, heaven knows Scorsese's past work and passion for film, so he will probably be forgiven for that rat.

Climates

Nuri Bilge Ceylan

6 November 2006

A Turkish film called *Climates* confirms that two matters, once thought to be limited to certain parts of the world, are now international. The first of these matters is parochial to film—cinematography. Nowadays, in most filmmaking countries, cinematography is at such a high level that in a way we are getting spoiled—we simply expect it to be fine. (The improvement lessens our enjoyment of many once-hallowed films of the past.) Gökhan Tiryaki, who shot *Climates*, tells us from the first moment that, whatever else may be true thereafter, this film is going to be a treat for the eye. We soon see that the point is not pictorial beauty, although it is always before us. Tiryaki photographs the theme, not just persons and places.

The second global element is that theme. It is no longer social news that a certain separation from joy—a lack of reliance on matters that might bring forth joy—is now endemic in much of the world. This malaise of self did not originate with World War II, but it has certainly expanded since 1945, notably in literature, theater, and film. (I haven't read the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who was lately awarded the Nobel, but I gather that his work lives in this atmosphere.) *Climates* is not even the first Turkish film to tell us that Istanbul is, in that sense, part of the West, but the experienced writer-director Nuri Bilge Ceylan never explains his characters' spiritual state. He simply assumes that we will understand.

Ceylan also plays the leading male role and shows quickly that he is a valuable screen actor of a certain kind—a presence as much as a performer, whose being verifies what he says and what he doesn't say. Ceylan's wife, Ebru Ceylan, who here plays his girlfriend, has a good deal of this quality; but, partly because of her role and also because of an evident temperament, she has other qualities as well.

Ceylan plays a university teacher; she is the art director of a television series. On holiday at a seaside resort, they make their way through the ruins of ancient temples, moving like abstracted visitors through these monuments of faith. Time becomes almost visual in the way that Ceylan handles the pace of this sequence—so suggestively, almost oppressively, that we are not surprised to learn that this pair has reached the end of their relationship. Next day they part, with a kind of relief. Sustained passion, it is implied, is the province of old poetry, not of modern lives.

The rest of *Climates* is about Ceylan's journey through solitude to a return to a former girlfriend, then to—in a surge that surprises him—an attempted reunion with the first woman. Much of this journey consists of cinematized thought and self-investigation. The chief overt action in the picture is his virtual rape of the second woman, though the sex becomes consensual. This episode is deliberately ripped out of the film's quiet texture; it is credible precisely because it is so strange. In the final sequence of the film, Ceylan follows his first lover to a wintry mountain location, where her television show is being made. Reunion is not glib. In the last shot he faces us alone as snow falls around him. He disappears: the snow remains. A dog barks.

It is fair to ask if *Climates* would be as effective if it were set in a country from which we expect films of this tenor. Admittedly, the setting does heighten interest, but this film is much more than an ideational travelogue. Like all good art, it evokes a supranational affinity. And there is an unsurprising paradox: this drama of personal uncertainties is lodged in a certainty of form.

Flags of Our Fathers

Clint Eastwood

13 November 2006

A soldier, all alone, climbs the top of a mountain on Iwo Jima. The summit is wide terrain scarred by battle. The field is deserted. The soldier is bewildered. Then we see the same man years later, now white-haired, waking from a nightmare, comforted by his wife beside him. Thus two elements of this film are fixed at once: the time planes and the haunting.

These are the first minutes of *Flags of Our Fathers*, Clint Eastwood's new film about the Battle of Iwo Jima in 1945. When word came of an Eastwood film on this subject, the blood didn't exactly freeze, but it did become tepid. Did the twenty-first century really need another gung-ho tale of World War II? Eastwood's reply is no. His film is crammed

with physical horror and courage in crisis, but the intent is not mere replication of battle. Under the carnage, Eastwood is searching for something deeper than details.

What is collaterally almost as interesting as the film itself is the fact that this searching is going on. This picture about the effects of war, short and long range, comes from an actor-director who earned a large part of his reputation by killing. Yes, he made *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby* and other exceptions, but the Eastwood persona grew through those Westerns in which his quasi-mystic figure settled people's hashes, as well as through the *Dirty Harry* series. The man who fixed his Magnum on a crook as he incised the phrase "Make my day" on American fantasy is the man who directed *Flags of Our Fathers*.

The battle for the island of Iwo Jima is a prime site for Eastwood's concern. One island after another—including Midway and the Solomon Islands—had been secured as stepping-stones toward the invasion of Japan. By February 1945, the United States Army Air Forces argued that Iwo Jima, only eight square miles in size but situated just 760 miles from Tokyo, was essential as a refueling station for bombers. Well aware of this, the Japanese forces fought even more fiercely. There were 22,000 Japanese soldiers on this little patch of ground—which, as the film says, was considered part of Japan itself and therefore holy—and they had been ordered to die rather than surrender. In a month of intense fighting, 18,000 Japanese and 6,000 Americans were killed. Out of this massive slaughter arose an incident that Eastwood uses as a speculum for moral inquiry. But before he gets to it, he gives us the invasion itself.

The picture is spectacular. The assault on Iwo Jima was shot in Iceland, which has black sand similar to the Japanese island's. The naval approach, the dozens of troopships and warships stretching ocean-wide, the waves of landing craft—all are of course available now by digital means, but even digital means can overwhelm. The combat scenes give us shivering clarity about the Iraq-worn term "embedded." And the long battle is braided with numerous sequences back home, at various points in time.

All this vast imperium was under the hand of a man who is now seventy-six. The co-producer was Steven Spielberg, who made the unforgettable D-Day opening of *Saving Private Ryan*; presumably Spielberg could and did advise. But there is no reason to think that Eastwood did not shoot every frame and construct the picture as he chose.

The screenplay, by William Broyles, Jr. and Paul Haggis, is based on a book by James Bradley and Ron Powers. Bradley is the son of one of the men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima—we see the son, a grown man, from time to time interviewing people. The film is centered on the famous photograph of the six servicemen raising the flag on the summit of a mountain, then moves from it to America then and America now, and then back to Iwo Jima. The screenplay does not skimp the staginess of the flag-raising (it was done twice for a photographer), but there is no touch of cynicism toward the men who did it, only a steady view of the incident as part of the flow of history. The Eastwood masculinity is now seen in this context. That makes it both stronger and more proportionate.

Three of the men involved in the photograph are sent back to the States in 1945 to help in a bond drive. Under the steely hand of a government manager, they are put

through vaudeville paces at a number of rallies, each more brassy than the last. At one banquet, each diner is served an ice-cream mold in the shape of the photograph. (“Chocolate or strawberry?” asks the waiter.) Bereaved relatives also appear, naturally quite different in tone. One of the three soldiers is an Indian, as they were still called, named Ira Hayes, who is constantly being teased about squaws and the reservation, and who has a berserk episode when a bar refuses to serve him. (In 1961 Tony Curtis gave a grim performance as Hayes in *The Outsider*, which detailed the fate of the veteran who had the bad luck not to be Caucasian.)

Eastwood, with his editor, Joel Cox, has woven a texture of reciprocal lights and glints. Throughout the film Eastwood slams the factuality of combat against attitudes toward it, even among those who think they are sympathetic. In order to deal with this gigantic event, to package and handle it, the government and the public put the word “hero” in play. The soldiers and marines who were there were courageous past belief, but heroism was not on their minds. They fought and survived or didn’t. One of them says, “I just kept trying not to get killed,” which he knows is insufficient yet is all he can say. Beneath all the action and attitudes is an implied recognition of war as ingrained in human genes. Eastwood seems to be saying that, before and during and after war, it is a constant referent.

Adam Beach, to put it practically, has the best role as Ira Hayes and fulfills it. None of the other characters is deeply developed, but Ryan Phillippe and Jesse Bradford tell some truth. The cinematographer, Tom Stern, has mastered what has become a new palette: the battle scenes could almost be in black and white, except that they are not. And the civilian clothes of 1945, especially the women’s, are touched with only enough color to keep them from being parodic.

We must wonder why Eastwood (and Spielberg) decided to make this film in the midst of a war that, for many of us, is savagely satirizing war even as it murders along. *Flags of Our Fathers* could not have been intended to dramatize a just war, World War II, in comparison with Iraq: the political background in 1945 is never mentioned. Perhaps it was to remind us, ultimately, that a film about combat is, even at its most veristic, only a film, which we watch in comfort.

Eastwood and his questions are not finished. Simultaneously with this film he shot a film about Iwo Jima from the Japanese point of view. (Two films at the same time—by a director in his seventies.) It arrives next year, not a moment too soon.

Letters from Iwo Jima

Clint Eastwood

29 January 2007

In the otherwise brilliant opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*, dramatizing the American landings in France on D-Day, Steven Spielberg made one small slip. He com-

pletely engulfs the viewer in the American assault; but when we are thus immersed, he inserts a brief clip of German machine-gunners firing at the Americans. This complete switch in view cracks our involvement. It takes a few seconds to become American-absorbed again.

Knowingly or not, Clint Eastwood has converted the Spielberg slip into a triumph. He made *Flags of Our Fathers*, about the American invasion of Iwo Jima, completely from the American view, and now he has made an entire film about the reverse view, the Japanese resistance. (Spielberg was co-producer of both films and possibly contributed, out of his own experience, to Eastwood's decision.) Instead of slipping one glimpse of the enemy opposition into *Flags*, Eastwood made *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which is devoted to the Japanese actions and states of mind as thoroughly as the first film was to the American forces. The only Americans in this second film are a few prisoners.

The double result is a unique achievement. The only remotely comparable work I know is *The Human Condition* (1961), Masaki Kobayashi's trio of films about continuing experiences in war, but to my knowledge no previous set of pictures showed both sides of a conflict: war as the collision of two humanized groups, each group trained to kill the other group. Eastwood's basic purpose could have been nothing other than to show that these two groups, in their very opposition, reveal their basic linkage. (I note again that this intent is remarkable for a director-star who made a career out of bravura killing, and I note again also that these two films, made almost simultaneously, are the work of a seventy-five-year-old man.)

Letters was written by Iris Yamashita and is based on a book by Tsuyoko Yoshido and the Japanese commander General Tadamichi Kuribayashi. The film begins with some modern Japanese investigators digging up a bag on Iwo Jima, and it ends with the opening of that bag, which is full of letters from Japanese soldiers that were never sent. The substance of the film is the activities of the soldiers who wrote those letters, including the general. They all know that the Americans are coming. They know that their task is to defend this island, which is considered holy ground, part of Japan itself, and would be used as a base for bombing their homeland. They know that they will be outmanned and outgunned. They know that they are there in order to die in Japan's defense.

Steeped thus in an ethos quite unlike that of their enemy, whose purpose is to conquer and survive if possible, it is poignant that, among the Japanese, many of the jokes, quarrels, and friendships are much like those of soldiers with whom we are more familiar. As they bicker and play their pranks and gab, these men dig their tunnels in the rocky hills, prepare trenches and gun emplacements, and know that, when the Americans arrive, they cannot have any victory except the glory of dying for their country. Those who question this aim suffer for it. All their preparations and all the reminders of their heroic privilege, all the terrible combat of the invasion, are superintended by the general, nobly yet warmly played by Ken Watanabe (who was the leading Japanese actor in *The Last Samurai*).

The actors are intelligently directed by Eastwood, which is especially notable because they speak a language he doesn't know. This is a completely subtitled picture

made by an American. The film is virtually all in black-and-white, even the occasional flashbacks to other places, including California, where the general once was stationed. Overall, the effect is presumably what Eastwood wanted: we are present at a momentous event, not watching a movie.

Surely the future will bring joint showings of *Flags* and *Letters*. These showings will confirm that Eastwood, who became world-famous with popular films (and in my view was overpraised for such “serious” pictures as *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*), has now contributed to the treasury of world film. These two Iwo Jima pictures ultimately disclose a theme more stark than the faintly smug pathos of antiwar films. Eastwood’s films concede war as an ancient and permanent curse.

The Italian

Andrei Kravchuk

5 February 2007

Lovely among film’s powers, yet relatively unsung, is its relation to children—not children in the audience but those onscreen. Something about performing before a camera comforts a child’s natural instinct to pretend. Of course all children play and pretend in one way or another, but the wonder is how, without knowledge and often without ambition, a child will behave on a movie set like a pro. This isn’t even necessarily true of those children whose parents want them to be film stars. An extraordinary performance can come from a child without any subsequent career, such as the little girl in *La Maternelle* (1932). The viewer is left wondering what happened to such a child in later life. Did she remember, as she wrapped groceries or did appendectomies, or lay sodden in a bar, that she had once moved thousands—in fact, still moves them?

What about Kolya Spiridonov? This six-year-old boy plays the leading role, the mainstay role, in a new Russian film called *The Italian*. Kolya has already been in several other films (unseen here), but there is no child-star quality about him. How did he create the thoughtful, oddly private performance that he gives in *The Italian*? Martin Ritt once told me, when I asked him how he got good performances from the children in *Conrack*, that it was a director’s job to woo and win the confidence of child actors. Andrei Kravchuk directed *The Italian*; did he, in Ritt’s sense, woo and win Kolya? Very possibly, but does that really account for the relative depth of this child’s acting? Why did he want to do it well? Pleasing his parents and massaging his ego and being praised, yes, but where did he find the sheer understanding? It seems fitting to fantasize: the camera speaks a secret attractive language to certain children who comprehend and respond. If so, it is a conversation that the camera and the child can keep secret from all the grown-ups around.

That collaboration begins in *The Italian* in a Russian orphan asylum. The adoption of Russian orphans by foreigners is now, as in some other countries, a thriving business.

To this provincial orphanage come an amiable Italian couple, and out of all the youngsters offered they choose six-year-old Vanya (played by Kolya). When we meet him, we feel that we would do the same. The adoption money is settled, but because of legal procedures and paperwork, it will be two months before the couple can have him. The film takes place in those two months, during which all the other children in the asylum call Vanya “the Italian.”

But all is not joyous anticipation with him. He now has questions about who he is, who his mother is, and he knows he will never be able to find out after he leaves. His questions are sadly deepened when he meets a distraught young woman who left her child in the asylum a few years ago and now wants only to see him. She fails; and there is a grim result to her frustrated search, which helps to heighten Vanya’s need to find his mother. He has a clue, and he escapes from the asylum to follow it up, becoming a kind of Dickensian waif out in the twenty-first-century world. The ending, too, is Dickensian.

Andrei Kravchuk here makes his feature-directing debut and shows that there is no reason not to have bright hopes for him. Besides his work with Vanya-Kolya, he uses the numerous other youngsters in the asylum like an unobtrusive choreographer, and he paints in all the film’s necessary touches simply. For instance, one plot strand concerns a teenage hooker, apparently the daughter or sister of the asylum janitor, who teaches Kolya how to read. Kravchuk does nothing to underscore the misery of the girl’s life; it is simply supplied. A word, too, about the crystalline cinematography of Alexander Burov, who has done several films with the highly esteemed Alexander Sokurov. Burov’s camera helps to keep the film well this side of arrant tear-jerking.

Day Night Day Night

Julia Loktev

4 June 2007

Day Night Day Night is the first fiction feature written and directed by Julia Loktev (who has made a feature documentary). The visual and nearly silent quality of the beginning, which is generally maintained throughout the first half, almost suggests that we are being shown a second film on this subject. First, there was a realistic documentary (which of course there wasn’t), and now we are seeing, so to speak, the interior of the documentary’s realistic subject, the shadows and very strange peace within a young woman who is going to carry a bomb.

She is never given a name. She arrives at a bus terminal in New York carrying a bag and a tennis racquet. (Soon we understand that the racquet was intended to mislead anyone who might be watching.) She gets in a car and is driven by a tacit chauffeur to a hotel in New Jersey; in her room the chauffeur draws the curtain and leaves. She says nothing when she is alone. She sleeps, then scrubs herself thoroughly. The next day three hooded and masked men arrive, and, treating her most courteously, they prepare

her for her job. We don't yet know definitely what it is, but we begin to suspect when the three men pray (a prayer in which she does not join). She is carefully instructed in a false identity—name, address, family background, and so on. She surrenders her cell phone. She is then strapped with a bomb in a backpack and is shown how to detonate it.

Through all these proceedings she is obedient, unquestioning. Then she is driven to a subway station in Manhattan, and sound effectively enters the film. Eventually she makes her way to Times Square. On her way, in and out of the subway, commonplace things happen. She buys some pretzels, a candied apple. She is neither blithe nor tense. She shows no sense of approaching finality. She simply has stepped into this role of suicide bomber as she might have stepped into her clothes.

What is particularly chilling is that she seems to have accepted this task as a reasonable possibility to deal with problems of her own. (Once she murmurs something about “meeting him”: whether “him” is a man or a deity is not clear.) Toward the end, after some minor mishap, she tries to talk, via pay phone, with several people. They cannot be reached. We then see the lights of Manhattan, the electrically starred skies. The picture ends—in Times Square.

Loktev and the actress Luisa Williams take their film out of the realm of physical terror into a conceptual abstraction. Their daring is that they do not explain: they show. Their picture is a distillation of a state that could, if needed, be attached to one set or another of bomber motivations. Here, uncannily rendered, is *das Ding an sich*.

Private Property

Joachim Lafosse

18 June 2007

From Belgium comes *Private Property*. The director, Joachim Lafosse, who wrote the screenplay with François Pirot, puts a dysfunctional family through several confrontations and crises; yet our expectation that crises will lead to some sort of resolution is deliberately left unsatisfied. Near the end a ghastly accident happens that shivers everyone, but it doesn't resolve the film's troubles. Some directors show us that many people lead their lives like trains on tracks; Lafosse shows that people who are moderately well-off and educated may find themselves in more broils, but resolutions are no more certainly available to them than to others.

Isabelle Huppert plays a fortyish divorcée with twin sons in their early twenties; the three live together in a capacious farmhouse in southern (French-speaking) Belgium. She has a job and supports the family: one son is a student, the other seems to busy himself only with household repairs. They all quarrel quite a lot, the sons with each other and both of them with their mother—quarrels minor and major that seem rooted in their lives.

Visually, Lafosse presents his film as a kind of study. Many scenes are literally framed in large doorways; and as far as I could see, there was never a cut within a scene. If three people are eating at a table, that is the shot. No cutting from one face to another, no two-shots; three people sit at a table. Thus we are given something of the feeling of eavesdroppers, rather than a catered-to audience.

Huppert has a lover of about her age—a Fleming, as the sons repeatedly note—and they usually meet in his car for sex. He wants her to sell the house and start a bed-and-breakfast with him. The sons strenuously object. Huppert's ex-husband, who visits occasionally and is still close to his sons, shares their concerns in this matter. Troubles erupt further, and at last Huppert storms out of the house to live with a woman friend. Then the accident happens. Soon the film ends.

But one of the points of the film is that nothing is settled. Lafosse hasn't carefully shaped a story: he has placed us in the company of these people for ninety-five minutes, not to delve into a deep theme or to unfold any startling conclusion, but simply to press us up against some fairly volatile human beings whom, he hopes, we will care about.

Thus *Private Property* is a daring film, because it is so full of conflicts that some rounded conclusion is even more expectable. Because Lafosse is relying on these characters to hold us, he has to make sure that they are interesting. He succeeds. The writing, to judge by the subtitles, is keen enough, and the performances brim with conviction. Huppert is both reticent and strong, commanding though quiet, yet fierce enough when she needs to be. She has had these unique characteristics throughout her career, able to speak through silence and to flare when needed. (Compare *Violette* and *The Piano Teacher*.) Her role here calls on a wide range of her now-cherished qualities.

The two sons, who are twins, are in fact played by two brothers, Yannick Renier and Jérémie Renier, both of whom excel. (Some may recognize Jérémie as the boy in *La Promesse* and *L'Enfant* [*The Child*], both directed by the Dardenne brothers.) Among the Reniers and Huppert, the deft interplay and shadings, apprehensions and comprehensions, demonstrate that in addition to Lafosse's visual sensitivity, he is clearly skilled with actors.

12:08 East of Bucharest

Corneliu Porumboiu

18 June 2007

On December 22, 1989, the Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu fled Bucharest, his helicopter taking off at 12:08 p.m. A new Romanian film called *12:08 East of Bucharest* is set exactly sixteen years later in, obviously, a town to the east of the capital. The local television station, which has a talk show, plans a program dealing with the town's reaction to the dictator's flight—the cheering in the town square and so forth. The talk-show host gets refusals from the two guests he wanted: he has to settle for a boozy

professor and a pompous old pensioner.

The program goes poorly. Political responses from the guests are vapid, listless. The professor, it turns out, was drinking in a bar on the square that day in 1989; the old man folds paper boats on the table in front of him and issues imprecise mouthings. Calls from viewers don't liven things much. At last, as doldrums are reigning supreme, a woman calls in and asks the host: "Do you know that it's snowing outside?" Such is the fervor that still rages in this town about the revolution that changed the country.

This talk-show section of *12:08 East of Bucharest* is done pretty much in real time. It lasts as long as the broadcast—something like thirty minutes—and thus runs the risk of being equally limp. An ancient theater problem with characters who are purposely boring is how to keep them from boring the audience. The writer and director of this film, Corneliu Porumboiu, is aware of the risk and deliberately engages it. He wants us to taste existence in this town as, with some amusement and indeed some beauty in the filming, he reproduces life here. The television talk show serves as the core of the scenes before and after it. Paradoxically, the picture would have failed if that talk show didn't bore us a bit. It fits into the whole like a key piece of a puzzle.

The picture—Porumboiu's first—opens with misty evening shots of the town, proving yet again that dull places can look pretty, and it closes at the end of the next day with the lighting of the streetlamps. Family scenes involving each of the three principals precede and follow the talk-show section. With all these materials conjoined, Porumboiu depicts the slow muffled-drum march of most of the town's lives from cradle to grave.

More: the film has a political edge. Ceaușescu was one of the worst men of his time. His victims certainly knew it, and the milling thousands who protested in the streets knew it. But television didn't show us the many, many thousands who didn't mill. Most people, says this film, live along as best they can, whatever the government, obeying this regime or that, content just to be allowed to trudge through day after day. For these reasons, presumably, the old man on the show says he didn't even particularly mind the dictator, as he folds his paper boats.

Porumboiu's film, sadly funny though it sometimes is, is an act of daring in itself, challenging our expectations of drama in order to show us that, for most people most of the time, life is not dramatic; it is only—if they are lucky—sequential. For many Romanians, surely, the end of the dictatorship was joyous and liberating, but for many others (more?) it was something that happened off in the capital or in another city while at home one kept on sweeping floors or hammering nails. The implication is that this is hardly a uniquely Romanian fact. Kafka is said to have written that "every revolution evaporates, leaving behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy." Possibly the anti-Ceaușescu revolution has by now evaporated and has left behind a new bureaucracy—I don't know—but, for Porumboiu, the great change so slightly disturbed the people in this town that they can hardly remember or care that it happened. The old man, who later shops for a Santa Claus suit for a party, is more intensely engaged with the shopkeeper than he was on the show.

4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days

Cristian Mungiu

30 January 2008

Are the clocks different in Romania? Some recent Romanian films imply a relation to time that is something like a swimmer's relation to water—enclosure, support, carriage. These films—*The Death of Mr. Lazarescu* and *12:08 East of Bucharest*—would have been edited quite differently in America, where time is not an environment but a challenge that the filmmaker has to keep meeting. Coarsely one might say that these Romanian films are slow, but their view of time seems as fitting for them as their physical settings. Soon the viewer accepts, very nearly relishes, their *adagio* tempo. It becomes intrinsic. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* again lures the viewer into this Romanian rhythm. I never expected to see a film in which, at the end, the two leading characters sit facing each other, silent, both of them simply steeped in what has happened to them. Then, but not hurriedly, only after we have understood their silence, the picture ends.

Cristian Mungiu's screenplay, which he directed, concerns two young women who are university students in 1987 and share a room in a dorm. At the start Otilia and Gabita are preparing for a trip, and after a while we learn where they are going and why. The title, it turns out, is the length of time that Gabita has been pregnant, and Otilia is helping her to arrange an abortion. The practitioner, not a doctor, meets them cautiously in a hotel room and, as part of his fee, requires something they had not anticipated.

Otilia, who complies for Gabita's sake, carries most of the film. Besides this compliance, besides all the fussing and arguing and persuasions, her role includes a quick visit to a birthday party for her boyfriend's mother, where she sits at a table in the midst of banal chat while she is riven with worry about Gabita back in that hotel room. At the end of the twenty-four-hour span of the story, Otilia has been through a sort of social-emotional marathon, but it never seems crowded or factitious because of the way that time is taken, is inhabited, all along the way. The very presence of time as environment has a strange effect. It lifts the picture out of the naturalistic into something like expressionism.

We are told that this film has a political intent for Romania. It takes place during the Ceaușescu regime, when there were severe laws against abortion (and an estimated 500,000 women died from illegal abortions). Mungiu presents most of the details in the ghastly procedure, which, we are to understand, has since been replaced with sanity. But, quite apart from its political weight for Romanians, the picture has its own life in art.

The cinematographer, Oleg Mutu, used a color scheme that is neither garish nor bleak: everything looks like itself, almost pitilessly. The acting follows suit. Vlad Ivanov makes the abortionist the product of circumstances. Laura Vasiliu, as Gabita, mixes pathos with patience. Anamaria Marinca, in the more demanding role of Otilia, meets those demands with an acceptance of things as they are. And one of those things is Romanian time, imperious even in a dingy hotel room.

Roman de Gare

Claude Lelouch

28 May 2008

The leading man in *Roman de Gare* is middle-aged and short, with a jutting jaw. His presence in a role that is supposed to be magnetic and sexy is an immediate clue that something odd is en route. Another quick clue: the title translates as *Train Station Novel* (something like our phrase “airport novel”). As with *Pulp Fiction*, the title announces that the picture plans to take the type somewhere else.

Not many of us will know this French popular genre, but neither can many of us believe that this picture is run-of-its-mill. The original story is by the director Claude Lelouch, who co-wrote the screenplay with his longtime collaborator Pierre Uytterhoeven. Lelouch, who was born in 1937 and made his first feature in 1960, is an old pro—a term that can be inflected several ways. This is his forty-ninth film (he is still best known here for *A Man and a Woman*, made in 1966). The bizarrerie of *Roman de Gare*, in both its drama and its comedy, suggests that it was conceived for this somewhat bizarre leading man. He is Dominique Pinon, possessed of the self-confidence of an odd-looking person who has been variously successful (as Pinon’s career has been). His confidence is justified: he goes far to make us believe that we are really watching the story that we are watching.

At the start, a best-selling novelist (played by Fanny Ardant) is making a painful confession to the Paris police, and she says that her account is so complicated that she must go back to the beginning, in 1998. That account begins so far from the novelist’s world that we anticipate a twisty trip. Here, twist details aside, are some of the persons involved. First, Pinon. We are made to suspect at the start that he is a serial child rapist, but he turns out to be someone quite different (who apparently doesn’t mind being suspected for a time of being a child rapist). We are also made to think that he is a missing husband, and this, too, turns out otherwise. Crucial in the story is a woman of about forty (Audrey Dana), a hairdresser who has been a member of an older profession. Much of the film takes place on the road, en route to the hairdresser’s native town, where her family has a farm. So, in the course of things, we are plunged not only into some aspects of sophisticated life but into farm life as well, with cows next to the kitchen. (At one point we even get an enormous close-up of a horse’s behind, which Lelouch seems to supply exactly to draw comment of this kind.) Toward the end, all the strands wind back to and around Ardant, the rich and elegant novelist.

The devices that bring about this finish are alternately clever and corny, even outrageous. (For instance, a passenger on a yacht who is thought to have drowned has instead swum ashore—a long way.) Occasionally we wonder not only what happens next but also why we care. The answer is beautifully simple: character. Each of the major characters and most of the minor ones are individuals, not pawns. Each was seen by Lelouch as a three-dimensional being. Each is the product of a particular background and exists credibly in this less credible story. No, not a story: it would be better to call it a plot, a

mess of plottage. Perhaps this is typical of *romans de gare*: whether it is or isn't, it points to a remarkable Lelouch quality.

While he and Uytterhoeven were concocting these escapades, while Lelouch was directing, he must have known—as any rational person would—that he was straining belief. But instead of slipping into the manipulation of puppets, Lelouch mined the verity of his people. All through *Roman de Gare* we are aware of the reality gap between the characters and the story lines. It is as if a group of genuine individuals had been recruited to perform a cooked-up movie.

Lelouch is still another director known for his use of improvisation, for letting his actors adjust and revamp the dialogue to suit their feelings at the moment. If this method was used here, high marks to it. His editors, Stéphane Mazalaigue and Jean Gar-gonne, have worked their own magic in whisking us from one locale to another, deliberately astonishing us at first but soon locking us in so securely that we enjoy the whisk.

Savage Grace

Tom Kalin

11 June 2008

Rich people are the center of *Savage Grace*. This is not only a fact, it is the mode of the film's being. From first moment to last, the film breathes the attar of *richesse*. The rooms designed by Victor Molero, the costumes by Gabriela Salaverri, the lapping of them by Juanmi Azpiroz's camera—all these confirm that we are leagues above any pleasure-limiting care.

This is not a historical film where extravagance is expected: *Savage Grace* begins in New York in 1946 and continues through a couple of decades. Nor is it like such wealth-weighted films as *The Shooting Party* and *The Remains of the Day*. In those pictures, which are both set in England, money was almost religiously dedicated to the sustaining of class. *Savage Grace* deals with the grandson of a man who made millions in business, and with the grandson's wife and child, all of whom live for easy gratification. Grandpa once said: "One of the uses of money is that it allows us not to live with the consequences of our mistakes." This epigram wilts eventually, but it serves as something like a motto for much of the picture.

The story, we are told, is true. Howard A. Rodman's screenplay is based on a book of the same title by Natalie Robins and Steven M. L. Aronson about Brooks Baekeland, his wife Barbara, and their son Tony. All of them loll in the midst of the fortune that Brooks's grandfather amassed from the invention of Bakelite plastics. The tale begins with Barbara's cossetting her infant son, and it ends with a drastic reversal. (There is much narration throughout, spoken by the latter-day Tony even when he is an infant onscreen.)

The Baekelands spend most of their time abroad—Majorca, Paris, and London are three chief settings—and in those places they do little more than please themselves. Large parties undulate past, as do women who attract Brooks; Barbara has her own diversions. As Tony grows, he becomes attracted to both girls and boys, and the story moves toward complications when Barbara sleeps with her teenage son's male lover. Not long after, these three sleep together. Some time later, mother and son have sex of their own, at her instigation and with her expertise.

These and the numerous other sex episodes do not exemplify any brave liberating credo: they are simply immediate responses to impulse. Other subjects occur, including a bit of painting by Barbara, but most of the picture is like a stream that bears those episodes past us. The ending, which is attributed to Tony's mental illness, is not seen as such: it is unpredicted. Given Tony's general behavior all along, that ending is just another kind of instant gratification.

Rodman's dialogue is like good costume jewelry: don't look too closely and it's impressive. The director, Tom Kalin, best known for a picture called *Swoon*, made fifteen years ago, unrolls his film before us like a marvelous fabric, sumptuous and seductive even in the non-sex scenes. What is clear from the first moment is that Kalin intends the film seriously, not scandalously. He is interested in the people who do these things, rather than the actions alone. (More: he lusciously savors the places in which they happen.) And he has cast the principal roles with splendid actors who invest the picture with depth.

The young English actor Eddie Redmayne, as the late teenaged Tony (there are, briefly, two younger Tonys), has lagoons of quiet and contempt in him that reflect interesting contradictions. As his father, Stephen Dillane, also English, is resourceful, wryly observant, able to surround himself almost visibly with things that he doesn't say. But the pinnacle is Julianne Moore. Those who have seen her Yelena in André Gregory's production of *Uncle Vanya*, as filmed by Louis Malle, know that, whatever role Moore undertook in the course of a varied film career, a marvelous actress was moving through, endowed with electric insight and admirable technique. Her triumph here is in holding our concern for this often foul-mouthed, graceful, but blatant hedonist. This amounts to a triumph over the screenplay: virtually everything she says and does could in itself estrange her from us. It is Moore who convinces not of hidden worth, but of some secret entrapment that she no longer struggles against but enjoys.

But unfortunately for all its assets, especially Moore, *Savage Grace* leaves us somewhat empty-handed. What is it for? It follows the facts of these lives, thus it leaves us even more convinced of the difference between life and art. The facts of this family are life: a film merely about those facts is not art, is not enough. Kalin has said that he saw a tragedy in the story: this may be the motor that got him going, but inevitable disaster is not in itself tragedy. At its gravest, *Savage Grace* is a parable about what happens to some people when they get a lot of money and don't know what to do with it except spend it idly. But the film is so excellently made in every way that we expect more from it than their dissolution.

The Edge of Heaven

Fatih Akin

25 June 2008

The writer-director Fatih Akin was born in Germany of Turkish immigrant parents and takes his cultural situation as his subject. *The Edge of Heaven* follows the lives of Turks (as they still think of themselves) in Bremen and, with those who return, in Istanbul—follows them with comprehension and sporadic surges of pity. Like so many immigrants in so many countries, these Turks are glad of their newfound jobs and comfort, and regretful that they couldn't have had them back home.

Akin's story articulates his theme of cultural contrasts. In Bremen a middle-aged man called Ali visits a prostitute (Turkish), invites her to live with him, and then, in a drunken fit, accidentally kills her. Ali's son Nejat, who is a professor of German in Germany (!), penitently goes to Istanbul to find and help the woman's daughter, Ayten. She, however, is a political radical and has had to flee Turkey—for Germany. There she meets a young German woman, Lotte, whose lover she becomes. Matters wind along in vivid cultural colors until finalities and reconciliations.

Each of the people, German or Turk, is thoroughly known to Akin, especially in his or her oddities. But Akin's basic interest in dealing with them is more general than particular. He is constructing a panorama of a modern mixed society that we know about—everyone is aware of the numbers of immigrants and refugees and exiles in the world—but which he wants us to encounter sensorily. He succeeds: all his people seem to step off the screen toward us. He is helped by a redoubtable cast, especially Baki Davrak and Nurgül Yeşilçay as Nejat and Ayten. In the relatively small role of Lotte's mother, Hanna Schygulla, who was an eminence in so many Fassbinder films, is lovely.

But the care that Akin expends on his people is skimmed in the structure of his screenplay. Accidental meetings and coincidences are overused. Bumps and questions interfere. For instance, the first section of the film concentrates on Ali and the prostitute: the son, Nejat, is peripheral. After Ali kills the woman and goes to jail, Nejat takes over the film until Ayten, whom he is looking for in Istanbul, takes the picture away from him. And we never learn about Ali's sentence for the killing until, after we have nearly forgotten about him, he turns up in Istanbul. Probably he served a term for manslaughter, we must guess.

These reservations are not afterthoughts: they bother a bit while the film is in progress. Despite them, however, we get to spend two hours in the company of some people who exist in variously engaging ways.

Adam Resurrected

Paul Schrader

31 December 2008

Like some European filmmakers, Paul Schrader began his career as a critic. In 1972 he published *Transcendental Style in Film*, a perceptive study of Ozu, Bresson, and Dreyer. He then proceeded to write and direct some untranscendental films, such as *The Yakuza*, about Japanese gangsters; *Blue Collar*, about union workers; and *Hardcore*, about porn. But grit was not to be his sole *métier*. His career has ranged widely, including a fictionalized biopic about Yukio Mishima, and *The Comfort of Strangers*, a subtle stratagem set in Venice. Could it be that his initial critical overview made him hungry for different possibilities? In any case, whatever the degree of success in each instance, he has insisted on change.

Now Schrader reaches the Holocaust. The debate about the morally acceptable use of the Holocaust in art continues: so does the making of such art. Holocaust films are now a genre, which is not an unmixed blessing—or unmixed curse. *Adam Resurrected* is a benefit, slender but valid, partly because it is not a direct confrontation of the subject. The approach is oblique, implying rather than depicting horror. This approach, as used here, is not mere novelty: it treats an aspect of the Holocaust that has been less frequently dealt with and that, in at least some measure, expands our empathy. More: the protagonist, through his very character, is a concise sampling of large human contradictions.

Schrader's basic material was an old novel by the Israeli writer Yoram Kaniuk, which has been much translated and discussed, and much bruited about as a film project. Now, with a screenplay by Noah Stollman, Schrader gives it screen being. The principal setting is a nursing home in Israel for Holocaust survivors. Kaniuk gives his subject an oddly moving turn by focusing on a comedian in this home.

Adam Stein, a survivor still working on his survival, was a café comic in the Berlin of the early 1930s. His act, full of jokes and tricks, was seen by a Nazi officer, and when Adam was eventually arrested, that officer devilishly exploited the comic's performing temperament. The Nazi took him into his quarters and made Adam live and work like a dog: moving about on all fours, carrying things in his mouth, and so on.

All this we learn in flashbacks. Most of the story is set in the 1960s, when Adam is still performing—seeming to perform his life now—in the survivors' home, still scarred in mind by the dog years. (The flashbacks are in black-and-white; the “present” is in the cool color of Sebastian Edschmid's camera.) His behavior is no longer canine, but he is a marked man, mordant, enforcedly smooth, moving among otherwise marked people in the home. For instance, one of them sweeps constantly without a broom; another always keeps her right arm raised. The comic, burdened by his own humiliating past, is given to occasional fits of violence that seem outbursts of long-delayed, misdirected revenge.

It is almost a matter of good luck for Adam that a boy of about ten is somehow brought to this home, a child who, through past mistreatment, imagines himself a dog and behaves like one as far as he can. The main thrust of the story is the interplay

between Adam and the doglike child, and how they redeem each other—how each can claim himself for himself. The story has a faint suggestion of Kafka, especially because of Adam's profession. Comedy, strangely apt, pervades Kafka's work. (Reiner Stach says of *The Trial* that "the text as a whole is terrifying, but the details are funny.") This is not to say that Schrader's film is anywhere near Kafka's level; still, its eerie humor and the idea of discovery through debasement remind us of him.

Adam Resurrected is rendered whole through its very making. First, the setting. Alexander Manasse has designed a building that seems both cleansing and comforting, a refuge where recovery from affliction may be possible. As with all good design, we feel that this is the only place where these events could have happened.

Next, and bizarrely perfect, comes Jeff Goldblum's performance as Adam. Throughout his career, Goldblum has often conveyed the sense that he is an amused observer of the troubles he is in. He has embodied the idea that comedy, sometimes painfully, persists just as constantly as woe. The first time I saw Goldblum, in *The Tall Guy* (1989), the opening shot of him was a close-up in a dinner jacket; then the camera moved down and revealed that he was wearing a tutu. He was even then playing a comedian, who had some serious things ahead of him in that picture. This combination, or contrast, has colored a lot of his work ever since, and it is central to his performance here. Adam is a man of torments, but, as with so many comics, that doesn't stop him from trying to be funny. Goldblum is ideal in the role. He makes the picture possible. (Authentic performances, less pivotal, come from Derek Jacobi as the head of the institution and Willem Dafoe as the Nazi officer.)

Then there is Schrader's directing. His work here is not only adroit—a toy train in the home dissolves into a Nazi train back then—it has an air of arrival, as if he had found a subject for which he had been searching. Of course he knows the antecedent Holocaust films, and he seems to anticipate a viewer's possible questions about this story. The way he handles his people and sustains the delicate atmosphere overcomes such doubts as they arise. He seems so convinced of the necessity for this film that, before long, we too accept it as an eccentric yet rewarding view of immense themes. *Adam Resurrected* becomes more than just another Holocaust film. Small but trenchant, it is an increase in experience.

Cherry Blossoms

Doris Dörrie

4 February 2009

The German director Doris Dörrie kneels to a film master of the past, Ozu. The central action of her new film *Cherry Blossoms* is taken from Ozu's sublime *Tokyo Story*. In Ozu a middle-aged couple in a small town decide to visit their children, most of whom live in Tokyo. The result of the parents' visit is an immersion in concepts of time

and mortality that stay with the viewer forever. For Dörrie, a middle-aged couple in a German town decide to visit their children, most of whom live in Berlin. But Dörrie was wise to limit her borrowing. The nub was taken from the master, but she proceeds with different means and with a rhythm much more vernacular than Ozu's cosmic pulse.

Rudi and Trudi—yes, Dörrie's screenplay dares to use that pair of names—live in a town where he works in waste management. The film opens with a fact that presages much of the atmosphere to come. Trudi is in a doctor's office being given the dire results of Rudi's examination. Trudi does not tell him the bleak news: he never learns that he is a terminal case. (His present physical condition is unimpaired.) Trembling silently in her soul, Trudi suggests to him that they go on a trip—to visit their children in Berlin and even possibly a son who works in Tokyo.

The children in Berlin are attentive but knowingly so. (One of the events that the parents witness, which seems odd until later on, is some Butoh dancing—a Japanese art closely interwoven with the spiritual.) Then, by themselves, the parents visit the Baltic seaside, and there it is Trudi who dies—suddenly, of a heart attack. In time, Rudi goes on alone to Tokyo to visit their son, Karl. The son, who has a modest job and an apartment to match, is more or less pleased to welcome him. Karl is very busy, and Rudi makes his own way around the huge dizzying city—once even tying a kerchief to a railing as a marker to guide his return.

In a park Rudi sees a young woman dancing in costume, Butoh dancing. (A pattern clicks.) Rudi speaks with her later. She knows some English, as does he, and she conveys to Rudi that her dance is an attempt to communicate with her recently deceased mother. This quickly leads to a closeness with the bereaved Rudi. Affection grows between the two, purely paternal-filial, as this waste-management German official ventures into Butoh. (Dörrie has long been interested in things Japanese: possibly she sees a touch of humor as well as amplitude in the union of her culture and this one.)

In these last days of Rudi's life, a fact that he doesn't know until the finish, the company of the young dancer helps him to find new inquiries in himself. The ending of the film, aided by Butoh, crystallizes in a moment of beauty everything that had stirred in the lives of Rudi and Trudi since their trip began.

The structure of the film has a touch of the contrived; still, Dörrie sustains *Cherry Blossoms* with the conviction of her characters. Elmar Wepper is just complicated enough as Rudi, so that we can believe this ordinary man is at last exalted. Hannelore Elsner, as Trudi, has a face that we feel we have known and loved long before we first see her. Aya Irizuki more than suffices as the questing young dancer. At the last Dörrie reaches the particular success that she apparently wanted. Watching her film is like watching a poignant personal obeisance to the great themes that Ozu opened for her.

Defiance

Edward Zwick

18 February 2009

Edward Zwick's film *Defiance* is based on Nechama Tec's book of the same title. Tec told a wondrous factual story of World War II, a history so close to incredible that it is awesome. In Belarus in 1941, two young Jewish brothers named Bielski organized a life-saving mission for Jews that, after much hazard and suffering, rescued twelve hundred lives from the Holocaust. The principal means of salvation was the immense forests of the region. The Bielskis hid a community of Jews in those forests, defending them when necessary but mostly moving them, with school and hospital and supplies, from place to place for three years. It is an account of courage, born of desperation yet nonetheless magnificent.

This was an apt subject for Zwick. He has long shown an affinity for the epic—sagas of heroes that have historical import. The results have varied in quality. *Blood Diamond*, addressing the interplay of commerce and oppression in Sierra Leone, and *The Last Samurai*, depicting the end of an era in Japan, had problems; *Glory*, about a black regiment in the Union Army during the Civil War, was soul-shaking. In any case, it would seem that Zwick was ready to be overwhelmed by Tec's book. In the foreword that he wrote for its new paperbound edition, he says, "To read of the Bielski brothers and their fight to create a safe haven evokes in me something utterly primitive and deeply personal," and added, "Those of us who make films are forever searching for heroes." Here he found some.

The Bielski brothers were rough-and-ready types who (Tec writes) belonged to the small minority of Jews who from the very beginning refused to become ghetto inmates. To elude the enemy they were constantly on the move.

They saw that the Germans were murdering Jews almost methodically, and they knew that outright confrontation would be futile. The Bielskis also knew the Belorussian forests and that they could hide people there. They began to recruit people for their community—at one point they even raided a small ghetto and took the occupants along. Soon they had something like a *shtetl* in those deep woods, a mobile *shtetl* that could shift evasively when needed.

It is a story for which the term "gripping" is weak. But for filmmakers it brought a burden. Zwick's screenplay virtually announces that he and Clayton Frohman, his co-writer, soon found that their love for the book had a steep cinematic price. The story is utterly absorbing, but it is not intrinsically dramatic. Zwick himself says it is the account of a "safe haven." Tec writes of Tuvia Bielski, the leader of the enterprise, "Refusing to become a victim, rejecting the role of avenger, Tuvia Bielski concentrated on gathering Jewish fugitives and protecting their lives." Tuvia himself said years later: "[The Germans] took anyone and killed them. . . . I wanted to save, not to kill."

Fighting and killing were inevitable along the way, but they were always, in an organic sense, peripheral. The center was this forest community of Jews, who were not a corps of resistance fighters: they were families hiding. Some of the men certainly helped in defense when the Germans attacked, but the story is more spiritually courageous than aggressive. These were people in flight, not in campaigns.

Zwick's film shows that he recognized this difference early on. He foresaw that, to give the story filmic vitality, he had to endow it with more action. He was aware, as he says, that "movies are . . . reductionist" against complicated sources, yet apparently he also knew that he had taken on two jobs, not one. He had to preserve this story that he revered, yet he had to do it in a film that was not merely a static account of people who were hiding.

Every chance for action was then wrung dry. The Germans harass the Jewish group as much as they can, but in the film the battle scenes with Germans are much expanded from the book. The Bielski raids on peasants for food are extended. When a wolf attacks a girl who carries food, Zwick makes the feral most of it to liven the screen. When a German soldier is captured by the Jews, Zwick turns the community into a manic chorus. Tuvia and Zus blaze one day into a fistfight, and when the moment comes that Tuvia picks up a stone to brain his brother, he stops—as we know he will—just in time. (Zus leaves to join some Soviet partisans nearby, but ultimately returns.) Tuvia has an amour with a girl in the group, and, to dress the film, Zwick chooses a conventionally pretty one, then photographs her flatteringly. And the one scene in which she and her lover are seen in bed is bathed in a golden glow that seems catchpenny. Throughout, Zwick surrounds his unique central story with more familiar movie-action material.

Then there are the Bielski brothers themselves. Zwick felt that he had to purify Tuvia and Zus. (There are two younger brothers, but they are minor in the story.) Zwick himself has said, in a publicity piece, that Tuvia and Zus were "raised wild in the woods . . . casually violent, sexually predacious . . . at times murderous." He cleans them up considerably for wide popular acceptance. Thus he reduces the fascinating contrast between their true characters and the ennobling work that they did. We might understand that a film's limits in time and breadth enforced the simplification; still, this purging seems part of an acceptance mode.

The center of the picture is quite another matter. Paradoxically, *Defiance* is at its best when it is not trying to be a smash film—when it is not, in a kinetic sense, cinematic. The creation of that Jewish community and the commitment of its members are enthralling. Some of this effect comes from a series of small authentic performances. Some of it comes from the places where it all happens. (The exteriors were shot in a Lithuanian forest near the actual places.) Eduardo Serra, the cinematographer, who worked with Zwick on *Blood Diamond* (and who copied Vermeer's palette in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*), has transmuted that forest into a series of immense verdant caverns. He makes us understand why, through literature and folklore, forests have seemed magical. When snow comes, as it does in the film's time span, it seems no more than magical winter furnishings.

The community is compassionately, even humorously, portrayed. Jewish characteristics are ticked off almost like a checklist—chess, violin, Talmud. Although it may be hard to imagine an intellectual who actually says, “I haven’t read a book in months,” it is wry to hear the man say it. A wedding in the open air, traditional except that a light snow accompanies the rabbi, seems by the time it occurs quite in order for this accommodated group.

Zwick’s two principal actors would have had a harder time if the characters had been the original Bielskis. But Zus, as given here, is well within the grasp of Liev Schreiber, who has ample volatility on tap as well as vulnerability. Tuvia is Daniel Craig, who proved himself an authenticating actor long before he encountered James Bond. He has depths that he likes to keep secret, which is oddly appealing in an actor. Here he could have used one gram more of command, but he never falters. His performance has comprehension and confidence.

So, at the last, *Defiance* stands strong because its cinematically difficult center is strong. It is hardly news that good subjects do not necessarily make good films; but good subjects, feelingly handled, can certainly concentrate a maneuvering film. When we finally see the long file of Jews making their way out of the forest across an open field toward freedom—an open field after many months of concealment—and we remember what they have endured, we are suffused with a sense of triumph. The trappings of the framework are well outweighed by this moment of exultation. Not often can we leave a film quite aware of its shortcomings yet grateful that it exists.

Katyn

Andrzej Wajda

18 March 2009

The Polish director Andrzej Wajda, who has had a sixty-year career, crowns it with a consummate film. *Katyn* seems to be the work that he has been moving toward all of his busy life. Katyn Forest is the place, or the main place, where more than twenty thousand Poles were massacred in 1940. Most of them were army officers, some of them were intelligentsia—professors, lawyers, doctors, scientists. Wajda’s father was one of the officers. *Katyn* is thus something other than just one more film for Wajda.

A hot controversy flared about responsibility for the Katyn slaughter. The Soviets, who in fact were responsible, tried to pin the guilt on the Germans, who were murdering elsewhere in Poland at the time. For decades it was strictly forbidden in People’s Poland under the USSR to suggest that Moscow was involved in Katyn. But after the end of Soviet communism, the guilt of the Soviets was established. Stalin had wanted to crush in advance any possible Polish resistance to Soviet control after World War II; so he had all these possible leaders shot in the head and blamed the Germans. (One purpose of Wajda’s film is to underscore Stalin’s guilt.) We see a few of the executions.

These add to the horror of the deaths in a particularly macabre way: those executions emphasize the grim workaday persistence of shooting all those men in the head one by one. Not even machine guns or gas.

The films of Wajda's life have ranged widely in intent, but he is rightly linked with the subject of World War II. Three of his earliest features were *A Generation*, about the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1942; *Kanal*, about partisans in 1944 under the German occupation; and *Ashes and Diamonds*, about immediate postwar states of mind. Several others during the sixty years have returned to that period. All the Wajda films that I have seen, whatever the theme, were staunch in fervor and humane in essence, but they were sometimes a touch heavy and self-conscious. *Katyn* seems the work of a reincarnated artist, sure, deep but simple. From its first moments, the film feels like the beginning of an acquaintance that will last.

First, swirls of clouds and ominous skies. (The music by Krzysztof Penderecki haunts the picture then and thereafter.) The clouds thin away, and we are on a bridge in September 1939. A group of people coming from one side meets others coming toward them. All are Poles. The ones on the left are fleeing the Germans, the ones on the right are fleeing the Soviets. Only a week or so after the signing of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact, the Germans are invading from the west, the Soviets from the east, to divide Poland between them. The atmosphere for the central catastrophe is in place at once.

Then the several stories begin—stories that take place before and during and after the Katyn disaster. The screenplay is by Wajda and three others, one of them Andrzej Mularczyk, author of the novel that is the picture's chief base. These writers use the fact of the massacre like an immense radiological core that affected some who were not murdered. Wajda himself says that *Katyn* is "a film about individual suffering, which evokes images of much greater emotional content than naked historical facts." His film weaves the garments of that suffering—and of desperate courage.

The first of those interwoven stories, the dominant one, concerns a Polish captain named Andrzej, his wife Anna, and their small daughter Nika. Andrzej and his regiment have been detained by Soviet troops. Amid tides of fleeing people around them, Anna pleads with Andrzej to escape, which he could do, and come with her and Nika. He cannot. He has his officer's oath. It doesn't seem intrusive to suggest that this scene may be autobiographical for Wajda (represented by the daughter, of course—Wajda grew up in a military garrison and may indeed have been part of such a moment). Anna and Nika leave: Andrzej rejoins his regiment. In time we see the results of his decision.

One of the other stories involves Andrzej's parents—his father is a professor whose university is smothered by the Germans. Another is about an officer who survived the massacre somehow and later finds himself in the army of Soviet-dominated People's Poland, even after he knows (but is forbidden to say) that the Soviets were the Katyn killers. The stories of relatives and friends are on the screen much more than Katyn itself, but the effect of Katyn is never absent.

The beautiful texture of this film furthers Wajda's purpose. The cinematography by Pawel Edelman drains the film of color when necessary to a black-and-white that looks exactly that way—shots from which color has been drained. Through other scenes, Edelman's camera seems to have reached into the dark and brought the faces forth. The acting is flawless. Wajda has cast his film with people who have talent and understanding. Besides his film life, he has also been active in the Polish theater, and we almost feel that he drew this company from a national ensemble. (There is a theater reference—one passing suggestion of *Antigone*. A young woman wants to give her murdered brother a fitting burial.) In particular, Artur Zmijewski as Andrzej and Maja Ostaszewska as Anna are quietly forceful. Wajda, consistent in tone, keeps them and all his actors on the outer edge of understatement. His control is masterly. Inevitably, when we remember that this film was directed by a man in his late seventies, this mastery leads to the thought that Wajda wanted to make this work before it was too late. It is a benefit to the world's film treasury that he succeeded.

One evening in 1939, exactly when the Germans and Soviets were invading Poland, I was at a ballet performance in New York. An announcement was made that a leading man in the company, a Pole, had asked to do a special piece as his Polish declaration of protest and love. (I forget his name.) He then came out and performed a solo dance to a Chopin polonaise, which was not much as ballet but was nonetheless overwhelming. I thought of that dancer, of the audience's wave of sympathy and helplessness, when I saw the last shot of Wajda's film—which I won't disclose.

Nightwatching

Peter Greenaway

7 November 2009

Peter Greenaway, the British director who was educated as a painter, first came to wide attention in 1982 with *The Draughtsman's Contract*, a silky comedy about seventeenth-century aristocrats. Greenaway then promptly set out not to build on this success, undertaking one eccentric film project after another. It was almost as if he were determined not to grow cumulatively, as most of the best directors have done. Of the Greenaway works that I have seen, only two of them—quite unlike each other—stand out in memory. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* was a modern comedy that revealed how sex can be achieved in restaurant restrooms. *Prospero's Books*, a slanted view of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, put the future in debt to Greenaway by preserving John Gielgud's exquisite reading of Prospero.

Now Greenaway turns to the Golden Age of Dutch painting. *Nightwatching* is a study of that painter's most famous work, *The Night Watch*, and though it certainly is a study, it is also—or primarily—a fascinating film. Greenaway has a thesis, possibly stated previously in the mountain of publications about Rembrandt. The painting, familiar to

millions, shows a group of civilian militiamen in Amsterdam rousing to an alarm. Greenaway's film sets out to prove that the painting is really an exposé of a murder—of one officer by another. Twenty points, all visual, are made to support this thesis.

He embeds his inquiry in an attractive style, decked with dramatized expeditions into Rembrandt's life, with scrutiny of details in the painting that makes us realize we have never looked carefully enough. In the low center of the screen through most of the picture is Greenaway himself, speaking about what we are seeing. He is always lucid and crisp, never didactic. Meanwhile, the screen keeps fragmenting around him into various shots of *Night Watch* details, or overriding him as we go back to Rembrandt's Amsterdam and the creation of this painting.

What is especially taking is that those inserts—can we say “flashbacks”?—are couched in the same light that we have all grown to love in that period. The cinematographer, Reinier van Brummelen, who has often worked with Greenaway, seems to understand what Rembrandt saw in the very idea of light. There are several sources of light in *The Night Watch*, not the usual single one, a matter that van Brummelen understands in his own work.

The murder thesis is too complicated to summarize, but here are a few of the details. A glove that is held by one man is for the wrong hand: he lacks a left glove, not the right-hand one that is shown. A weapon that another man grasps is held in a sort of penile position, and the shadow of another man's weapon falls across the first man's crotch. All the data may or may not support the murder thesis, but at least they adroitly parse the painting. In the event, however, one of the best proofs that Rembrandt was revealing a crime is circumstantial. After 1642, when this painting was made, his financial condition sharply worsened. He continued to paint some of the greatest of all paintings, but patronage fell far off. In 1642, when he was thirty-six, he was a successful artist and teacher; when he died in 1669, he was virtually a pauper. It certainly is arguable that the Amsterdam bourgeoisie punished him for his daring.

Questions remain that Greenaway doesn't raise. Why did Rembrandt do it? If he knew of a crime or suspected one, why, instead of reporting it, did he spend all that time and talent suggesting it in a painting—a huge one, too? And what did he do about the crime, or what was done to him besides the neglect, after the work was finished? Greenaway saith not. He merely puts forth his implications and inferences in a highly unusual, thoroughly intriguing film.

The Night Watch has had a weird physical history. In 1715 it was moved from one building in Amsterdam to another, and because its new space was smaller than the first, the picture was trimmed on all four sides. (A copy of the original exists.) In 1911 a visitor to the Rijksmuseum, where it hangs, attacked it with a pocket knife. In 1975 a man again attacked it with a knife. The second assailant, says David Freedberg in *The Power of Images*, directed his slashes at one of the figures who is prominent in Greenaway's story. Freedberg notes: “The man [the assailant] may have been completely beyond the pale, but he was not completely out of control.” The connection with Greenaway's thesis is thin, but it exists.

The Messenger

Oren Moverman

30 December 2009

An extraordinary Iraq war film takes place at home—at homes—and moves through wartime experience known generally yet generally disregarded. *The Messenger* is about the Army's Casualty Notification office. When a soldier is killed, two uniformed soldiers, usually decorated veterans, are sent to the soldier's home to notify the next of kin personally. (A letter from the Secretary of the Army soon follows.) Notification personnel are bound by strict rules of behavior—"Do Not Touch the N.O.K." is one of them—but no rules can protect the messengers from deep effect on themselves.

Good films, we all know by now, begin with good screenplays. Even if that adage is not invariably true, it is certainly the case here. *The Messenger* was written by Oren Moverman and Alessandro Camon, and it vibrates throughout with dialogue so taut and incisive that it not only fits what is happening, it is itself gratifying. The writers have, among other glints, utilized what are apparently clichés of army talk in such a way that they affirm army life as a universe. "Bullets fly, and soldiers die." The captain who says this has presumably heard it many times, and his very familiarity with it makes it fitting rather than stale.

The precise dialogue is all the more remarkable because Moverman, who also directed, was born in Israel, where he served four years as an infantryman in the Israel Defense Forces. His ear is now tuned to America: he has written previous scripts in this country. But out of experience, he seems here to be relying on a freemasonry among soldiers of most countries that, friendly with one another or not, enables them to understand spoken and unspoken things about one another.

Staff Sergeant Will Montgomery, recently wounded in Iraq and decorated, is relieved from active duty and assigned to work with Captain Tony Stone on a notification team. Stone, a veteran long past disillusion, is friendly-stiff with Montgomery, and the sergeant, expecting nothing in particular, obeys orders, period. Together they make six visits of notification during the film. The first N.O.K., a father, becomes furious at them, almost violent. Another father simply becomes ill on the spot.

But *The Messenger* could not merely be a chronicle of those visits, and not just because they are terrible. Those visits are part—huge but only a part—of the team's lives. Between times we learn more about Stone and Montgomery, in the past and the present. Stone, a former drunk, says that he has been married three times, twice to the same woman. We have seen at the very start something of Montgomery's private life, a visit to his apartment by an ex-girlfriend who is now affianced elsewhere. We see him moving, at first a bit awkwardly, into his new duty. The two men drink and eat and get to know each other. We see their professional experience knitting them. At one point, they more or less provoke a fistfight with three men just because, we sense, they want to vent their own stopped-up feelings. Later on, when the two men have been seasoned together by their notification visits as if they had been in battle together, they turn up slightly soused,

and very out of dress, at the engagement party of Montgomery's earlier girl. By this time, we can believe that their disarray represents inner disorder.

The script makes few concessions to movieness. One element might be the result of a story conference call for a non-grim element, but the writing and the performances of this material are so touching that it does not intrude. Montgomery becomes fond of a young woman who is now, as he and Stone have told her, a widow. She, reticent and a touch embarrassed, subsequently responds to the sergeant as a man. The attraction between them takes us because she suggests subtly that, in an intricate sense, he has been to her an emissary for her husband, a vicar. And he, aware of both the inappropriateness and the truth of his feeling, is ready for her.

Thus scenes that might have seemed sheer audience compensation in other hands are germane with Moverman. He has taste and invention and discretion. The blunt moments of death notification are done with variety but no sense of straining for variety. The scenes between the two soldiers off-duty never mention the notification job—except for one blunder that Montgomery makes—yet they are steeped in the experience. The scenes between the woman and the sergeant have almost no physical contact yet are full of feeling. The very last scene, which is between these two, is capped with a graceful elision.

Ben Foster, who plays Montgomery, is not an immediately compelling actor, but Moverman has mined all that Foster has to give, which is plenty. With Woody Harrelson, who is Stone, Moverman may have had the opposite job—keeping him down. Harrelson is one of the unappreciated film forces of our time. (His performance in *Natural Born Killers* still sears in memory.) Actors of his stripe and experience sometimes lean on their power a bit heavily; but here Harrelson simply becomes a hard-bitten officer who, in the midst of cozy domestic settings, goes daily (as he says) to hell and back. Samantha Morton, who plays the widow, understands her and fulfills her.

But it is Moverman who gives the film its ultimate distinction. First, he has asked his cinematographer, Bobby Bukowski, to keep shot after shot warmly lighted but enclosed in dark. Excepting the exteriors, almost all the action, casual though it may sometimes be, takes place in the embrace of shadow. Moverman has also perceived this film as more than its immediate story. Its ultimate sense is deeper. Stone and Montgomery go stoically through daily torment as soldierly duty. But Moverman conveys that their lives are the tiniest dot in a vast complex of forces that can take human beings where they had no wish or intent to go and gives them no choice: existence itself as a form of servitude. The texture of the whole film and this implicit theme make Moverman's debut very welcome.

Natural Born Killers

Oliver Stone

12 July 1999

The massacre at Columbine High School in April brought a flood of agonized responses. The whole country was sickened—yet again—by teenaged mayhem, which didn't end with Columbine High. Causes for these horrors are being sought, and high among the suspected causes is the abhorrent film and TV violence now gorged on by teenagers. It is certainly hard to believe that so much slavering murder on large and small screens is not affecting adolescent fantasies.

But I have been worried by the broom-sweep in some of the comment. Most particularly, I was concerned by Gregg Easterbrook's article in *The New Republic* ("Watch and Learn," May 17), in which he attacked the disgusting pharisaic greed of those who exploit the juvenile appetite for blood. I was struck by the fact that, more pointedly than some others had done, Easterbrook included *Natural Born Killers* as an example of exploitative violence. I couldn't help feeling tangentially involved, because I had praised Oliver Stone's film in this column when it appeared ("Apocalypse Now," October 3, 1994) and had admired it even more when I saw it again later that year. I felt obliged to look at the film again in the light of the Columbine events and Easterbrook's comment. This was easy to do: a tape of *Natural Born Killers* is now available in the director's version, with the restoration of about 150 small cuts—an addition of only about six minutes—that had been made to secure an R rating.

I have now to report that my admiration for this film is undiminished, has in fact grown. *Natural Born Killers* is a paradigm, furious yet sardonic, of some of the ills and the imbalances in American life, the festerings of injured ego, that exploded at Columbine High. (For me, there were fifteen victims at Columbine, not thirteen as usually cited. Why omit the two killers who then killed themselves? In any humane conspectus of crumpled teenaged lives, they were victims, too.) It seems to me important to distinguish between Stone and the cheapjacks at the lower end of his profession. I'm not arguing that Stone's work ought to be available to children under seventeen, although I don't see how younger teenagers who are barred from certain films can be shielded from the violence in newspapers and on TV—for instance, the news from Columbine itself. I'm speaking here only of the effect of this film on adults. My interest is to see that it is not classed with exploitation films merely because it has at least as many murders as the worst of them. (Fifty-two in the three weeks of the killers' career in Stone's picture, and that's before the final prison explosion.)

Let me try to illustrate the film's quality with its opening ten or twelve minutes. (In actual fact, this "director's version" opens with a brief introduction by Stone in which he points out, with samples, some of the material that had been cut.) We first see a lonely stretch of desert road, then a wolf against the sky, then a close-up of a hissing snake. Then we are in a roadside diner where Mickey and Mallory, the title pair, are having coffee. While Mickey orders pie, Mallory goes to the jukebox, puts on a record, takes off her coat and begins to dance in her bustier and slinky slacks. Three men arrive at the diner. Two of them come in while the third works on their car outside. The youngest newcomer gravitates to the gyrating Mallory, dances alongside her, and soon makes moves on her. She attacks him fiercely. A brawl swiftly erupts in which the two newcomers, plus the waitress, plus the cook, are killed by Mickey and Mallory. The man outside tries to flee, but Mickey throws a knife through an open window and fells him.

Those are the basic data of the scene, probably to be found in the original story by Quentin Tarantino, author of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction*. But they are only the scaffolding for the screenplay by Stone, David Veloz, and Richard Rutowski, which in turn couldn't have been much more than a scaffold for Stone's directing and editing. We do not know at the start of the diner sequence that Mickey and Mallory are already well launched on their calm, chuckly, savage murderings, but the atmosphere in the diner, set by lighting and camera angles, is ominous. As the sequence begins, a spate of images pours through the diner's TV, including a glimpse of Nixon saying "As I leave . . ." The camera, almost always canted to one side or another, keeps moving in and out on the characters, and the images keep changing, from color to black-and-white and back, and back again, suggesting that Mickey and Mallory are aware of themselves as figures in a film and keep thinking of ways to imitate movie action better. Bits from that opening desert road are intercut. Throughout the callous killing, Mickey is comically sage, like a judge dispensing justice instead of sudden death. The knife he throws after the fleeing man circles in comic slow-motion flight. Mallory is sensuously enjoying herself. When the scene is concluded—to their satisfaction—they embrace; the lighting melts into a rosy glow, and they dance slowly to "La vie en rose."

Thus this opening diner scene fixes the texture that Stone uses in the whole picture, a texture that I once called "collage in forward motion." This unique, intricate, contrapuntal dynamics eventually incorporates comic strips and politics, nature and the unnatural, is both savagely satiric and chillingly flip, is the film's aesthetic and moral base.

Then come the opening credits, under which we get glimpses of the violence ahead. Then there is a scene under the desert stars, Mickey and Mallory outside their parked roadster. As she talks, we faintly see angels float down above her, angels whose (ironic) presence underscores her lack of guilt about the just-concluded diner bloodbath. Mickey tells her how much he loves her, and as she squats to pee, she says she has loved him ever since they met. Then, slam!, comes the title of a television show, "I Love Mallory," technically a flashback, in which the first meeting of Mickey and Mallory is presented as an episode of a sitcom, with a canned laugh track. In the course of this episode, the

pair decide to hook up. They barbarously murder her parents, and set off in her father's roadster—and all within the sitcom framework.

However a teenager might view these opening minutes, hardly any adult would think them scenes from a run-of-the-horror-mill flick. The mature viewer may dislike this material but can scarcely ignore that Stone is much less concerned with violence as such than with using it to thematic purpose. Very early on he makes clear that he is not only going to tell us his story, he is going to lampoon the telling of that story by the media, as the murders and other atrocities committed by this pair cram the maw of the media and titillate the lives of the fascinated public.

Throughout, Stone seems to view what is happening as a new take on André Bazin's definition of an image: "everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented." Stone's film creates a symbiosis between the screen's usual reality and the Bazinian images of it—what the TV screen adds to reality. Instances abound. The flashback to the suicide of Mickey's father, deliberately committed in front of the son when he was a small child, is handled like a documentary. When Mickey is ultimately captured, a female Japanese television reporter describes the scene to the camera—her comments are subtitled—as if to assure the world that, since it's on TV, it's true. The *Walpurgisnacht* prison riot at the end is caused by a live television show in the prison.

This tape of the "restored" version is packaged with a second tape, consisting of outtakes, an alternate ending, and statements by Stone and others. Among his remarks, Stone says that in a film about two people who break rules, the filmmaker had to break a few rules, too. Several people in the cast, including the two principals, report that performing in this film had little to do with conventional directing and acting. Stone tried to keep his actors sizzling, improvising, open. But even without these interviews, we could know that this film blends design with spontaneity, just as the story blends action with the media's gobbling of it.

Is any film worth the life of anyone, especially of a teenager? The question is at the level of a game of Truth or Consequences. A more useful question is whether we want to restrict the cultural fullness of film that those teenagers will see after they mature. In our eagerness to change the conditions in which teenagers are stuffed with garbage, it would be easy to maim the possibilities for serious work intended for the mature audience—possibilities that are slim enough anyway.

A moment such as this one, when Columbine and comparable events have smitten us, carries some danger of overcompensation. For me, ours would be a poorer film world if Stone had not made, among his other rightly troubling pictures, *Natural Born Killers*. He understands that the Ur-murderer Cain dwells right among us, within us, is only too easily stirred, and, when loosed nowadays, becomes a glamorous star. An artist who hates Cain's stardom as a corruption, who can slash it open with the blackest possible humor, is himself not a corrupter.

Grand Illusion

Jean Renoir

23 August 1999

A blessing. Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* has been restored, freshly printed, and freshly subtitled. I enter my old demurral about the title. It's a mistranslation: the French original, *La Grande Illusion*, means *The Great Illusion*, without the romantic melancholy of the English title. But for the huge favor of this restoration let us be grateful.

The camera negative, the original film that rolled through the camera when Renoir was shooting, had a wartime journey. The occupying Germans sent it from Paris to Berlin; the Soviets took it over along with their sector of Berlin; it went to Moscow; and it was brought back to France as part of a film exchange with the USSR. Only in the 1990s was the Renoir negative discovered amidst some other material. And now we have this print.

As far as I can judge—and I hope I live another year for every time I've seen this film—very little has been added that we hadn't seen before. But the print is fresh, clean, nicely graded in its range of blacks and grays. At least equally important are the new subtitles—by Lenny Borger, an American who lives in Paris. (Declaration: he's a friend and former student.) The former subtitles were inadequate, most notably in the dialogue of the POW who is a former vaudevillian and who speaks in puns and snatches of song. Borger comes as close as is imaginable to rendering his chatter in English. And all of the dialogue seems cleaner, more pointed. Difficulties—like an untranslatable exchange about the use of “vous” and “tu”—have been overcome.

I can't comment yet again on this magnificent work except to say that its account of French prisoners in German hands during World War I seems now even more soaringly elegiac. In the early 1970s I published an essay on the film, and I venture to quote the last paragraph:

In his book about his father [the painter], Renoir says that when he and his brother were children, his parents often went to the theater, leaving them in the care of a neighbor. Nevertheless his parents would jump in a cab at intermission and rush home for a few minutes to make sure the children were all right. A child who has known a home like that must grow up to inevitable disappointments, but has some security against them. For the characters in *La Grande Illusion*, their figurative parents—the traditions and ideals of the past—will not be back at intermission; they will never be back. The film is a farewell to their memory and the acceptance of a world without them.

D'Artagnan's Daughter

Bertrand Tavernier

11 October 1999

For the first time, I comment on a VCR tape. It's a film that has not been released theatrically in this country and is now being offered to the public in this form; and it's a film by an eminent director. Bertrand Tavernier made *D'Artagnan's Daughter* in 1994: it was acquired by Miramax for U.S. distribution and, according to press reports, disagreements followed between distributor and director about cutting this 130-minute picture. Result: stasis. Further result: issuance of the picture on tape, in the director's version, as *Revenge of the Musketeers*.

The film certainly could have been condensed a bit, particularly the sword fights, but it is good luck, and good fun, to have it available. (Even though the framing has been altered to TV-screen proportions.) This latest derivative of the Dumas material is fundamentally silly, but all the people concerned—and some of them are first-class—are well aware of the silliness and are enjoying it so much that the pleasure is infectious.

D'Artagnan, now gray-haired, has a teenaged daughter, Eloise, who has been raised in a convent. How she became expert with a sword in that convent is one of the questions we are implicitly asked not to ask. She flees the convent, encounters a young poet who falls in love with her, rushes to her father in Paris, and involves her father, now a mere fencing teacher, in fighting so complicated a conspiracy that he needs the aid of his three former companions, Athos, Portos, and Aramis. (The last, believe it or not, has become a bishop.) The complexities include a villain who is smuggling the first coffee into France and is also abducting nuns and selling them as slaves in America.

But what actors and what a director. Sophie Marceau, as Eloise, is an embodied caprice—light, fast, funny, pretty, enchanting. Philippe Noiret—and I almost feel I should stand as I type his name—is D'Artagnan, paradoxically perfect as Noiret usually is, unpredictable yet exactly what we expect. See, for instance, the moment when he visits the grave, as he thinks, of Athos.

Tavernier's talent is no longer a question: what needs attention is his versatility. The director who made, among many others, *The Clockmaker* and *The Judge and the Assassin*, and several pictures about current social conditions in France, here swashbuckles with the best of them. Verve and flow and an eye for magnificent composition combine to keep us delighted despite the flapdoodle story. The film is like a nineteenth-century opera by a master whose choice of libretto this time deserves a sympathetic wink.

Greed

Erich von Stroheim

13 December 1999

On Sunday, December 5th at 8:00 p.m. (EST), Turner Classic Movies (TCM) will broadcast a new enlarged version of Erich von Stroheim's legendary *Greed*. The broadcast will be repeated that night at 12:30 a.m. (EST). This is a major event for anyone interested in film.

The history of *Greed* is cruel. Von Stroheim was an Austrian émigré who began his Hollywood career in 1914 as an actor and found a niche during World War I as “The Man You Love to Hate,” playing German officers with shaved head, tight tunic, and monocle. (The publicity called him an ex-officer descended from Austrian nobility. He was, in carefully concealed fact, the son of a Jewish hat manufacturer and had briefly served in the Austrian army. The “von” in his name was self-bestowed.) He began his directing career in 1919 with *Blind Husbands*, in which he also played his suavely diabolical character. More importantly, he showed extraordinary directing talent—scathingly realistic, sexually suggestive, and as cynical as Hollywood could permit. He was quickly recognized as a filmmaker of unique ability with a polished “continental” style.

Von Stroheim moved on to direct three more comparable films with, in one of them, another performance by himself. The stories in his first four films might have been found in any women's magazine of the day, but they were executed with a sophistication that could not then have been found in any magazine or in any other Hollywood director. I once showed his third film, *Foolish Wives* (1922), to a group of about twenty poets and artists, asking them in advance not to be put off by the novelettish plot, just to keep their eyes open. Before the film was ten minutes along, they were murmuring, and when it finished, they applauded.

For his fifth film, von Stroheim ascended in quality of material. He had long been keen on *McTeague*, by the pioneering American naturalistic novelist Frank Norris, and von Stroheim was now empowered to film it. The title of the picture became *Greed*. By this time, in addition to his artistic standing, von Stroheim had a well-earned reputation for extravagance, which he proceeded to push much further. We can sum it up by saying that he began shooting in March of 1923, and in January 1924 he showed, to a selected group of twelve people, a first cut of the film that ran seven or eight or nine hours. (Accounts vary.) The film was never again shown at that length.

What happened to *Greed* thereafter—von Stroheim's arguments with the producers, the various versions—is too intricate to summarize. Result: the version that was released in December 1924, which has been the usual version until now, runs 135 minutes. The excised footage disappeared, though rumors of its whereabouts persist. For the rest of his life, von Stroheim mourned over what he called “the skeleton of my dead child.”

He would be somewhat happier now, though not content. Rick Schmidlin and colleagues have “restored” 115 minutes, to make a film of four hours and ten minutes. I put that key word in quotation marks because the restoration consists of many stills

from the lost footage, here arranged and intertitled according to von Stroheim's recently discovered continuity script. (Those intertitles occasionally bow to Milton and Shakespeare.) Schmidlin, who recently did the restored version of Welles's *Touch of Evil*, has made the masterly most of the available materials, and Robert Israel has written a score that, appropriately, savors of theater music of the silent era. The result is in some ways astonishing, in all ways invaluable, and ultimately, because of the loss it now underlines, saddening.

Norris's novel was clearly spawned by Balzac and Zola. Von Stroheim's adaptation, done with June Mathis, begins in a California gold camp in 1908 where the young McTeague, a tousle-headed giant, is a miner. Early on, we see his tenderness, as he rescues an injured bird, then his temper and his strength as he throws a man over a cliff for harming the bird. To protect and further him, his mother apprentices him to an itinerant dentist, and after a few years McTeague opens his own office in San Francisco. He meets and eventually marries a German-American girl named Trina, thus bilking the hopes of another suitor named Marcus Schouler. (I'm not only condensing, I'm omitting the subplot.)

Trina becomes obsessive about money, heated by the very acquisition of money—\$5,000, which comes from her winning a lottery. She keeps the winnings to herself and dreams about gold. Schouler revenges himself on McTeague by exposing him as an unlicensed practitioner. McTeague is ruined. In time, destitute, maddened by his wife's miserliness, McTeague murders the now crazed Trina. He flees back to the gold fields. Schouler joins a posse in search of the murderer. The last sequence, one of the most famous in world film history, shows the two men meeting and fighting in the middle of Death Valley. The finish is an antecedent of the bitter endings of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The Wild Bunch*.

All the performances are presentational, without great depth or finesse. Zasu Pitts, as Trina, has the only character to go through some sort of development. Gibson Gowland as McTeague, Jean Hersholt as Schouler, Chester Conklin as Trina's father, all present their characters almost as pageant figures, embodying this or that temperament, of which they produce more as needed. (Curiously, three of these actors had quite different careers, before and after—Pitts as a fluttery comedienne, Hersholt as a kindly soul, Conklin as a Keystone buffoon.)

But it could be argued that von Stroheim saw these characters not as individuated personae, but as factors in a huge ruthless machine, integers of fate grinding to and being ground by inevitability. This view is supported by the difference between the acting and, so far as it can be separated, the directing, which is generally much more comprehending and subtle. It's as if von Stroheim attempted to match Norris with what he did as director, and as if he viewed his cast not as artists in themselves, but as mobile components of his design. Some of his touches are too heavy to be called touches. McTeague and Trina are in a lonely railway station, and he kisses her passionately for the first time just as a locomotive, hissing steam, pulses by. A mousetrap in her mother's

hands snaps shut as Trina's marriage is arranged. But such moments seem excesses of a fatalistic drive, a rampant naturalism.

Von Stroheim was one of the first directors to insist on location shooting as needed—the streets of San Francisco, the blazing platter of Death Valley for the last sequence. All the compositions articulate space with originality and daring. Instance: McTeague on the stairs, large in the foreground, with Trina in clear focus above him on the landing. (Did Orson Welles know of this shot when Kane shouts down the stairs after the departing Jim Gettys?) Or: McTeague and Schouler fighting over a card table in the narrow corner of a saloon. (Did Fritz Lang know of this shot when a fight erupts in a corner of a beer hall in *M*? The answer to this, and to the Welles question, is probably “no”; *Greed* simply anteceded them.) Von Stroheim dabs in contemporary markers, like the tiny American flags in the hats of Trina's immigrant family on Washington's birthday; makes sure that the setting of the story is in the story, like the streetcars running past windows during intimate scenes; ventures into Zolaesque sex. After Trina withdraws her \$5,000 from the bank in gold coins, she spreads them on her bed, then undresses and rolls on them. (Throughout this black-and-white film, Schmidlin has had the gold tinted, as von Stroheim wished.)

The supporting and incidental actors were selected with an eye for something like what Eisenstein called *typage*, the face that instantly characterizes the person sufficiently for the story's purposes. With the cinematographers Ben Reynolds and William H. Daniels, both of whom had illustrious subsequent careers, von Stroheim mixed carefully the harsh light of revelation and the clerestory light that softens so much of nineteenth-century photography. The contrast seems to imply a difference between life as it is and life as we wish it.

It would be exaggerating to call *Greed* a deeply moving experience in character and story: the very success of von Stroheim's schema seems to preclude that. The film's consistent fascination is in its marvelous texture—and in its almost anachronistic seriousness of intent. Yet it is no mere historical specimen. It is a vital achievement in a new art that helped to open possibilities in that new art. Von Stroheim went on to direct three more pictures—including *Queen Kelly*, with Gloria Swanson, which he was not allowed to finish. (Another aborting of an exceptional work.) And he continued as an actor. Today he is best-known generally for his Rauffenstein in Renoir's *Grand Illusion*, where his caricature Hun of First War films is transmuted into a full-bodied summary of an age. But the directing career he might have had, the work he might have given us, is only one more sharp poignancy in the “what if” history of the arts.

The Schmidlin version of *Greed* will be issued on videotape by Warner Brothers early in 2000.

The Leopard

Luchino Visconti

21 August 2000

Lately I had a shock that I have had before. I went to see a film that I had seen decades ago and discovered that my opinion of it had changed greatly. It was Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*, which was released in 1963 and which I reviewed that year, a large-scale drama of the Sicilian nobility in the time of the Garibaldi invasion. Seeing it again, I was overwhelmed. I looked up my review and blushed. Yes, I had praised the film's visual splendor, but I wriggled now at the rest. A few hours before, I had been greatly stirred by this film, which in 1963 I had indicted for shortcomings in acting and directing. Most of the performances now seemed more integral and true than they had once seemed, and Visconti's virtuosity in directing, which I had once scorned for ostentation, now seemed much more at the service of the work.

I had felt this same discomfort with some other past reviews of mine, though certainly not with many. Most often my latter-day opinion is more or less what it once was. Soon after this second viewing of *The Leopard*, I re-saw Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975), re-read my review, which was negative, and would not have changed a word. And also, of course, I have sometimes thought less of a work than I once did. But, among my latter-day upward revisions, *The Leopard* was extreme. I had really been swept along by this second encounter, and my first review seemed almost to have been written by someone else.

I tried to understand what had changed. With the acting, the explanation was simple. Originally the distributors had feared to release this Italian film in the United States with subtitles. *The Leopard* had an American star, and they thought that audiences here would not want to hear him speaking Italian—or someone else speaking his Italian lines for him. So in the 1963 version the star, Burt Lancaster, spoke his own lines in English, and all the other actors were dubbed—quite unskillfully—into English. Most of those performances had been jarred askew by American voices. Now, when I heard these actors with their own voices, they seemed more rounded, three-dimensional, alive. The chief improvement, contradictory though it sounds, was in Lancaster, who plays a Sicilian prince. In 1963, with his own voice, he had seemed hollow. Now, dubbed in Italian, he was much more believable and commanding. (A few years ago I learned that Lancaster had been dubbed by a famous Sicilian actor, Turi Ferro.) He even looked more princely. Though that earlier English sound track had hurt the rest of the cast, the replacement of Lancaster's somewhat gassy voice with one of ring and authority seemed to arch his back.

As for Visconti's directing, my altered response might well have been because in recent years I, like many others, have been starved for imaginative, individualistic filmmaking style—a treasure that was showered on us in the 1960s. Now, hungry for the feeling that a unique artist—not a corporation—had made a film, I was suffused with gratitude as I watched Visconti's hand figuratively caressing every measure of sump-

tuousness, of cultural texture, in scene after scene. Such a moment as the spreading of an immense tablecloth on the grass when the prince's family stops to picnic during the journey from Palermo to their summer palace, with the grooms walking the horses in the background to cool them down—I longed for it to linger. The very last moment of the picture, in a small Palermo square at midnight, where the prince kneels and crosses himself when a priest and acolytes hurry past to someone's bedside, now seems a peak in film art.

Explanations or not, I still felt somewhat miserable about my four-decades-old review, and in my misery I sought company. I remembered that Eliot in 1947 had publicly recanted the low opinion of Milton that he had once published. (Ten years earlier he had written that Milton was a poet whose sensual capacities “had been withered early by book learning.”) I remembered, too, how Shaw, in his persona as music critic, had recanted in old age his much earlier dismissal of Brahms's *Requiem* as music that could be “patiently borne only by the corpse.” These lofty examples consoled me a bit; but they did more than that. They confirmed my belief that criticism is always in some degree diaristic, a journal of experiences rather than a series of cast-iron pronouncements. This is one more proof of the mercurial nature of truth. Every serious critic speaks the truth of his opinions, but that truth comes from the person he is at that moment, not the person of his past or his future.

When we respond to a critic, we can keep in mind that both he and we are communicating at exactly that moment. Certainly a very great deal of criticism that I have been reading through the years has benefited me through those years, has stood firm. It is the exceptions that are worrisome.

Charles Rosen, one of the most rewarding critics writing today, magisterial in the fields of music and literature and painting and aesthetics, has faced this dilemma, in himself and in his writing. In the introduction to his collection, *Romantic Poets, Critics, and Other Madmen*, Rosen says:

In collecting these essays, I have left them without correction. . . . I do not want to read any fictitious foresight into these essays, or to inject any observations on the most interesting of modern trends. It seemed more honest to try to bring them up to date by adding a postscript when an apology or second thoughts seemed advisable, or when subsequent developments needed to be remarked. Where some of the discussion has dated, I hope that the reader will be pleased to remark a certain period flavor.

Those comments could helpfully preface any collection of criticism. (I may say that I have often used the postscript device in my own collections.) But, though the postscript is useful to critics, it doesn't solve the problem, which besets everyone, critic or not. Our minds are freighted with beliefs that we may no longer believe.

That is the most important aspect. All these reservations are true for everyone, not just for critics. The plain, discomfiting fact is that every one of us who has watched plays and films or read books or listened to music or looked at painting and architecture is,

in some measure, self-deceived. Filed away in the recesses of our minds are thousands of opinions that we have accumulated through our lives, and they make us think that we know what we think on all those subjects. We do not. All we know is what we once thought, and any earlier view of a work, if tested, might be hugely different from what we would think now.

What can we do about it? Other than realize that this condition exists, very little. We cannot spend our lives reexamining past experiences to keep our opinions up to date. We have to operate with a certain degree of trust. If someone asks my opinion of Laurence Olivier's *Oedipus*, which I saw three times in 1946, all I can do is summon up as best I can what I felt and thought in 1946 and hope that I would react the same now. If the question is about *War and Peace*, I can either sit down and re-read it before answering or dig out my memory file of what I thought when I last re-read it thirty years ago. All of us rely on what our former selves, sometimes quite different selves, once thought. It's a scary realization—that we are all carrying around in our heads a lot of opinions with which we might now disagree.

REVIEWS (DOCUMENTARIES)

Photographer

Dariusz Jablonski

10 May 1999

An astonishment. Here is a documentary about the Lodz ghetto under the Nazis, made with still photographs taken by a Nazi civil servant who was stationed there.

Photographer is so extraordinary that apologetics for new documentaries on the Holocaust are out of place. In 1987, a collection of 400 slides was found in a secondhand bookshop in Vienna. The pictures had been made by a man named Walter Genewein, lately deceased, an Austrian accountant who had worked for his government during the war and had been assigned to Lodz to keep track of industrial production in the ghetto. Eventually the Genewein slides came to the attention of Dariusz Jablonski, a Polish filmmaker who is a graduate of the Lodz film school. Jablonski moved to make a documentary that would use the slides as its armature.

He said, "I am not interested in Genewein's pictures for what they show, but rather for what they try to conceal." In aid of revelation, he filmed a long interview with Arnold Mostowicz, an eighty-six-year-old survivor of both the Lodz ghetto and Auschwitz, and interwove it with Genewein's photos. Mostowicz had been a physician in the ghetto, who gave up medicine after the war because of illness and became a journalist. His comments—in Polish, with subtitles—deepen the film, of course, but they also increase its awareness. To hear his level, explanatory tone, from someone who had been in those sites at that time and had known some of those people—it's a bit like listening to a ghost.

Photos of Nazi atrocities by Nazi military photographers are familiar, but these pictures are different. They were not taken for propaganda purposes, and they show no atrocities. They are simply the pastime of an official stationed in the neighborhood, who took the pictures—with a camera confiscated from a Jew—much as if he had been stationed in any foreign place and wanted to take home photos of the interesting peasantry. Streets and people, the *Judenrat* activities, children and crowds, with no attention to what was happening off camera or where these people were bound—what quaint, slightly amusing souvenirs.

Few facts in *Photographer* are new. What chiefly holds us is that these photographs exist, that someone took them as a sort of diversion, a hobby. Moreover, they are in color, and Jablonski includes some correspondence between Genewein and the Agfa company, in which Genewein complains about the color results in his pictures and Agfa sends him better film for his hobby.

Jablonski is able to reverse the usual use of color in historical documentaries. In

Photographer it is the past that is in color and the present in black and white. This reversal intensifies the chilling “tourist” aspect of the color pictures. This reversal also underscores the reversal of human values in the two time planes. Often Jablonski overlaps two shots; a color shot of a street in 1941 fades into the same street in black and white today. The ghastly effect is to certify that those past events really did happen on the same planet.

Some music is used, mostly with discretion. Jablonski’s one slightly bothersome addition is some of the sound. To hear a crowd buzzing under a still photograph of that crowd is to hear artifice.

We get some shots of Genewein himself working at his desk and of his comfy Lodz apartment. We learn how his Lodz post was professionally useful to him: because of his diligence during those years, he rose from Level 8 in the civil service to Level 2. Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase is famously problematic, but with Genewein “the banality of evil” comes inevitably to mind.

Oskar Schindler isn’t mentioned in the picture, but presumably Genewein knew him, or knew of him. In any case, *Photographer* made me take another look at the opening sequences of *Schindler’s List* in the Lodz ghetto. My admiration for Spielberg’s film, already high, rose. It was as if he were amplifying what Jablonski intended—showing us, out of range of Genewein’s color camera, what was going on beneath and behind those “human interest” shots.

A Trial in Prague

Zuzana Justman

8 October 2001

In 1970 Costa-Gavras made *The Confession*, a film about the so-called Slansky trial in Prague in 1952. The screenplay was based on the book of the same name by one of the defendants in that trial, Artur London; Yves Montand played London. Principally because of Costa-Gavras’s stern direction and Montand’s grimly interiorized performance, the film was a chilling plunge into political cruelty and mystery. Now a Czech-born American director, Zuzana Justman, has made a documentary on the same subject, called *A Trial in Prague*, that is more obliquely yet at least equally chilling.

Justman, who immigrated to the United States in 1948, has made three previous documentaries about wartime and postwar Czechoslovakia. She was moved to make this film when she discovered documentary footage of the trial, with which she then interwove interviews of people related to the defendants. The result is gripping, not just because of the steamroller cruelties involved—which are reason enough—but because it illuminates, from within, some of the subtler attractions of communism.

The basic facts of the Slansky trial are well known. The Communist Party took over the Czech government in 1948, murdering many of its opponents en route, and set itself up quite overtly as a satellite of the Soviet Union. Stalin was greatly disturbed when

Yugoslavia broke from his control in 1948, and he took steps to strengthen his hold on the rest of the Soviet bloc. He ordered a purge in Czechoslovakia, not intrinsically very different from the Moscow trials of 1938. Those to be purged were not visible enemies of the party but Communist eminences. To purge anti-Communists would merely be expected; but for the party to purge itself—that was exemplary and intimidating.

Fourteen Czech officials were chosen—perhaps by Stalin himself—to be labeled traitors, and chief among them was Rudolf Slansky, secretary general of the Communist Party. Eleven of the accused were Jews. (This was a profound shock to other Jews in the party because communism was, in principle, a new order in which there would be no anti-Semitism.) The indictments were prepared, the accused were arrested and isolated, and after some months of what is politely called interrogation, the defendants all pleaded guilty. It was clear then and is even clearer now that these men had been broken and were well rehearsed in their public confessions. Eleven of the defendants were hanged; three were given life sentences. Those three, including London, were released after Stalin died.

Here is just one example of the mind-twisting that was the norm in these proceedings. One of the defendants, a Jew, had been a prisoner in the Mauthausen concentration camp during the war. The Czech party now argued that since the Nazis had allowed him to survive, he must be a German spy. (In the 2000 documentary *Fighter*, Jan Wiener recounts how, after serving as a fighter pilot in the Free Czech force that had been based in Britain, he was arrested as a British spy when he returned to Prague and was imprisoned for five years.)

The footage of the trial would be ludicrous if it were not hideous. The vicious prosecutor is clearly a stooge fearing for his own life. The defendants sit like robots waiting to be switched on. But the people whom Justman recently interviewed are striking individuals. London's widow in France; the present Czech foreign minister, whose father was hanged; the widow of one executed man, who has placed a stone for her husband in the family graveyard even though his body was cremated; an Englishwoman who had been full of political passion in the 1940s and married a Czech Communist, then moved with him to Prague, where eventually he was hanged—all of them recount events that are like scenes from a Koestler novel, or a parody of one. Outstanding among the interviewees is Eduard Goldstucker, who was a defendant even though, or probably because, he had been the first Czech ambassador to Israel, and was accused of being a Zionist spy. He served four years in prison. He is an impressive man with fluent English; he and the Englishwoman are the most explicit about the enticements and the complexities of Communist belief.

This subject of belief, coursing through the interviews and placed in the context of the footage of the trial, leads to a persistent question. The film does not specify the present beliefs of all these survivors, but it does help to clarify why, after these trials, after the gigantic twentieth-century oppressions in other Communist countries that make these trials look pygmy, many people still cling to communism. For instance, when London was convicted, his wife at first tried to divorce him so that she could

remain a pure Communist. But she dropped the divorce suit when her husband was released, as if she was grateful for the chance to remain a Communist. When she and London were reunited in France, they remained Communists. All these people—the defendants and their contemporaries—came into communism at a time when fascism seemed about to gobble up the world. Communism was not merely a program for progress and justice; it was a salvation and a home, a cosmos to live in. Odd as it may sound to us, one of the chief blessings of the party was the sheer joy that it thus provided. When the party did some disquieting things, such as the Moscow and Slansky trials, these things could be seen as necessary genuflections to tactical necessity, not as reasons to forsake this ideological home. As Koestler dramatized it in *Darkness at Noon*, the crux was not whether the accused were innocent or guilty, in conventional bourgeois terms, but whether they would plead guilty as a public act of support for the party. Truth, in other words, was party-defined.

The film does even more in terms of latter-day clarification. A pressing question now for many of us is how, after what is known about party actions in the world, after the collapse of so many Communist governments, intelligent persons can still be Communists. The basic reason seems to be an updated version of what it was for those Czechs in the 1940s—the poverty of alternatives, alternatives that are inspiring. The past cruelties are regrettable to them but are accounted necessary reactions to bourgeois attacks. The economic collapses of Marxist countries are seen as failures of procedure, not of theory. Besides, no alternative belief provides a home in the way that party membership does: a program, a quasi-religion, an implicit linkage with men and women around the globe who are in distress. These twenty-first-century Communists look at the terrible conditions in much of the world and, despite the depravities of Stalin and his colleagues, cannot believe that anything other than communism will fundamentally improve matters. Assume that they know a remark attributed to a former Prague resident named Kafka: “Every revolution evaporates, leaving behind only the slime of a new bureaucracy.” Justman’s film, though hardly made for this reason, shows why many concerned people prefer the risk of that slime to, as they think, emptiness.

Fahrenheit 9/11

Michael Moore

19 July 2004

What we see first are fireworks, celebrating Al Gore’s victory over George W. Bush in the Florida vote, therefore in the presidential election of 2000. The television announcements of this result are soon followed by reversals, then by the maneuvers that confirmed Bush’s election. Michael Moore thus launches his two-hour documentary attack on Bush with the new president’s arguable right to the job. Moore then specifies presidential appointments that, though not corrupt, certainly drip with moneyed cro-

nyism. In this atmosphere—of control by capitalist hegemony—Moore details how the administration heated up the public about terrorism.

Now the title of the film appears, along with Moore's authorial credit. Then comes, cinematically speaking, the film's most effective touch—a minute or so of black screen during which we hear distant crowd rumblings and sirens. We wonder. Suddenly we see agonized faces. These people are watching the World Trade Center disaster.

The positioning of this sequence, between the early propaganda for public jitters and the march to war, has a strong implication: Moore is saying that the disaster was of use to Bush. Something that was possibly not on Moore's mind, though he put it in my head: 9/11 was to Bush what the burning of the Reichstag in 1933 was to the newly installed Chancellor Hitler, a disaster contrived by an opponent (the fire was not, as was once thought, set by the Nazis themselves) that, in the government's view, was at once a proof of its policy and a means to advance it. Moore underscores this thought by calling his film *Fahrenheit 9/11*. His title caroms off the title of Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, which is the temperature at which books burn, by which burning a totalitarian regime progresses. Moore is telling us that, to Bush, 9/11 was a gift from the terrorists to advance his plans against them. And as some of the film's early data mean to show, the case against terrorism, sound enough in itself, was strongly colored by at least two other considerations: oil and sheer imperialism. (Not quite incidentally, I note that Moore's title had a special edge for me. Back in my book-publishing years, I was the editor of Bradbury's novel. He is reportedly angry at Moore's exploitation of the title, which is understandable enough; yet I couldn't help being tickled by this evidence that Bradbury's title is now common currency.)

What supports Moore's implication is that the invasion of Afghanistan, on the ground that Osama bin Laden was based there, was made possible by the terrorist attacks that bin Laden had planned. Before the Afghanistan punitive venture was finished (it is still unfinished), Bush and Co. announced that bin Laden was connected to Saddam Hussein, thus the Iraq invasion must follow—with seeming logic but with (quickly discernible) different motives. The Iraq invasion soon led to the biggest public relations gaffe so far in the Bush administration: the president's landing on an aircraft carrier a few months later, where he proclaimed, under a banner stating "Mission Accomplished," that the Iraq war had been won.

Moore proceeds to explore some of the horrors of the Iraq conflict. This survey includes glimpses of Iraqi civilian sufferings and a visit to an American military hospital where we see amputees, some of the injured who have become marginalia in the reporting of battle casualties. (Moore omits the familiar shot of the toppling of a Saddam Hussein statue, possibly because it would redound to Bush's credit.) Eventually, after traversal of ruin and horror, the film leads to an extensive account of a woman named Lila Lipscomb, a resident of Flint, Michigan—Moore's hometown—who is at first proud of her son's place in the invading force but is later seen in heart-wrenching moments after he is killed.

Moore's chronicle of this war keeps the blood boiling. Still, all through the film there are bumps and crevices. It was silly, even debasing of the enterprise, to include personal pokes and incidental gibes. Moore tells us that Bush, in his first year in the White House, spent 42 percent of his time on vacation. Bush adequately replies to a question about it by saying that being out of Washington doesn't mean that he is not working. Bush's face, at the Oval Office desk while he is waiting to begin a television speech, betrays nervous sidewise glances, but this might also have been true of Abraham Lincoln if he had been readying himself for the networks. Bush's verbal slips could have been left to David Letterman's regular feature of presidential glitches. To show Bush and others being made up for television is hardly a disclosure: who isn't made up for the camera? Paul Wolfowitz licking his comb and running it through his hair before going on camera looks stupid, but the real stupidity is his failure to see that he was already on camera. John Ashcroft singing a patriotic ballad that he wrote is stupider, because he did it for the camera. But history will judge Wolfowitz and Ashcroft by matters other than hairstyling and song. The insertion of a cowboy parody of Bush and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld is cheap, as is the insert from "Dragnet" meant to mock a Bush remark.

Equally regrettable is the Michael Moore persona that occasionally intrudes in all its smugness. His previous films, *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine*, which in themselves worked for worthy causes, were smirched with that persona. For instance, in *Columbine* he interviewed Charlton Heston about gun control in a way that was meant to show Moore's courage but was only a facile shot at a sitting duck. Here, when he finds out that some congressmen haven't even read Ashcroft's Patriot Act, he gets into an ice cream truck and rides around Washington reading the bill over a loudspeaker. This is an antic, not a protest. Even more ostentatious are his accostings of congressmen in the street asking them to have their children enlist for service in Iraq. This is not righteous vigor, just exhibitionism.

Worst perhaps is Moore's comment that, when the United States invaded Iraq, we were attacking a country that had never attacked us or threatened attack. This is literally true but contextually inane. The Gulf War had been caused by a bestial dictator, and ten years later many liberal Americans believed the reports of the dictator's weapons of mass destruction. Some of us, however, felt that whether or not such weapons existed, whether or not Saddam was linked with 9/11, the idea of America's launching of a pre-emptive war was shocking and in this case immensely dangerous, with the potential to ramify beyond anyone's vision. The military intrusion into the complicated Arab-Islamic world, of which Iraq is only a part, promised immense and long-lasting troubles. We are now seeing only the beginning of them.

Toward the end of Bill Clinton's stay in the White House, Hillary Clinton memorably charged that he was the target of a right-wing conspiracy. Moore never mentions either of the Clintons, but his film can easily be construed as an argument for Senator Clinton's accuracy: that, whatever its target, a right-wing bloc exists; that this bloc has taken over the White House and, for its own solipsistic reasons, has jimmied this country into a war of which the duration and the consequences are unforeseeable.

Fahrenheit 9/11 is sometimes slipshod in its making and juvenile in its travesty, and of course it has no interest in overall fairness to Bush. But it vents an anger about this presidency that, as the film's ardent reception shows, seethes in very many of us.

Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037

Ben Niles

19 November 2007

In 1874, Gerhard von Breuning, a Viennese, published a book called *Memories of Beethoven*, whom he had known fifty years earlier. In a footnote about Beethoven's love of improvisation, Breuning wrote:

When one looks at [Beethoven's] grand piano (still in my possession), considered one of the best makes at that time, with its tiny tone and its mere five-and-a-half octaves, one finds it hard to conceive how it could have been adequate for Beethoven's tempestuous improvisations, while realizing that it was as a consequence of Beethoven's sonatas that the piano was altered and strengthened into its present state, indeed it had to be almost made afresh. His gigantic piano sonatas must be regarded as inventions in a double sense, for he must already have had in mind the piano as perfected today, the piano of the future; and it would be fully justified to call the modern piano the Beethoven piano.

The piano for which Beethoven composed before it existed is being made today, carefully, lovingly, in Queens, New York.

Watching *Note by Note: The Making of Steinway L1037*, a documentary about the Steinway factory in Queens, I couldn't help thinking, after Breuning, that Beethoven would have been pleased. I've read that he sometimes visited piano factories and fussed about the instrument's manufacture. Difficult man though he was, he could not have been unhappy about the attitudes and the results in Queens.

Steinway, of course, makes no claim to be the only painstaking piano maker. One artisan notes, however, that this plant makes only two thousand pianos a year; some other places turn out one hundred per day. Yet the total number of factories has decreased drastically through the years, while Steinway holds fast. The director of this film, Ben Niles, has interviewed many of the workers in the plant. A skeptic may wonder if Niles avoided the less fervent, but every man in the picture likes what he is doing and likes what he is part of.

Note by Note follows the birthing of one piano, L1037, from start to finish, which in life takes almost a year. Plenty of other material comes along: for instance, the wooden case of L1037, as with all Steinways, has to age for eight weeks at one point. We watch men at their specialties, jobs with terrific names like "chipper" and "stringer." (We also

visit a lumber mill in Alaska, where the wood bound for Queens is discriminatingly chosen.) We linger in the display room, where quite different pianists such as Lang Lang and Hélène Grimaud and Harry Connick, Jr., and Hank Jones come to try pianos and luxuriate in the sound. All the while, our protagonist piano is proceeding through the stages along the way to its final tone testing.

Then fantasy follows fact. For more than an hour we have been watching manufacture—shaping, molding, hammering, planing, polishing, and so on—and now that the work is finished, the result is not an article but a miracle. It ripples, it thunders, it sings. Certainly if we had followed the making of a violin or a flute or a trombone, the end result would thrill. But no other instrument is so integral to our society, our culture. (And our literature. Think, for just one out of innumerable instances, of Tolstoy’s “The Kreutzer Sonata”: “Evidently the sound of the piano is purposely made to drown the sound of their voices, their kisses.”)

This documentary—quite unpretentious, simply good film reporting—feels like an oasis of civilization. For eighty-one minutes we are in a venue where storybook principles really apply, where pride is justified, and, for the last *fortissimo*, where they are giving Beethoven what he wanted.

The Beaches of Agnès

Agnès Varda

15 July 2009

Naturally enough, the New Wave is rolling back. The tide of new French talent that flooded world screens just before and after 1960—bringing Godard, Truffaut, Rohmer, Rivette, Resnais, and Chabrol, among others—has been ebbing for some time. Movingly aware of this, Agnès Varda, one of the earliest if not one of the most eminent members of the group, has looked back at her life in a film.

The Beaches of Agnès is autobiography as festival. It begins on a beach in Belgium that was important to her as a child, and it visits other beaches that have mattered in her life. She says,

If you opened people up, you would find landscapes. If you opened me up,
you would find beaches.

But, with the fizz and fervor that have marked most of her pictures, she takes us to many other places where she has lived and worked, and we meet many of the people, some of them famous, who have figured in her career. Little that she includes, except clips of past films, is rendered exactly as is: most of it is decked with Varda touches. (Instances: a suite of large mirrors on the first beach that reflect her and her helpers; a beach created with truckloads of sand in a narrow Paris street just because she had imagined a beach there.) Some of her diversions can get too cute, like a music-hall number in which she

performs, but the picture ripples along very pleasantly, with energy and affection on the surface, and with inevitable bitter elixir just below.

She was born in Brussels in 1928. (Her hair in the present-day shots is dark, yet in some of the other shots done recently it is gray.) In the war years her family moved to the southern coast of France, and to the beaches there. After schooling, when she thought it was time to stop being a virgin, she climbed aboard a Corsican fishing boat with a crew of three and solved the problem. Rather quickly it became clear that she was destined for some kind of pictorial work, because, as she moved through the world, she saw every place in terms of pictures of the place. She studied photography and spent ten years as stills photographer for the renowned Jean Vilar and his Théâtre National Populaire. (Some stunning photos here.) Then she became interested in cinema.

Why? The reason is unexpected. For words, she says. Motion pictures brought her much more than words, of course; but primarily it was the addition of language, rather than motion, that drew her to cinema. Oddly, this priority is not supported in the Varda films that I remember, or the clips of them here, where there are always ideas of some kind but where the purpose is the presentation itself. *Beaches* is spangled with other clips, too, with snippets and flashes of past enterprises—we glimpse the earliest film appearances of Philippe Noiret, Michel Piccoli, Delphine Seyrig, Gérard Depardieu—usually with shards of apt dialogue but with even more striking visuals.

Wound through most of her story is her marriage—to the late Jacques Demy, himself a gifted director (e.g., *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*). Varda made a film about him after his death in 1990, and, as I remember, it has some resemblance to *Beaches*: a director's life presented through clips of past films along with past events. But it did not have the champagne effect of *Beaches*. Varda's effervescence has long been celebrated, yet here, too, there are contradictions in her career. Her very first feature to be seen in the United States, *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), is marked with her visual idiosyncrasies, though it deals with the two hours before a young woman gets the results of a biopsy. And the intensely serious *Vagabond* (1985)—the drama of a young woman struggling to shuck society's protocols who is destroyed by that society even as she withdraws—has no touch of Varda's usual stylistic vivacity but is her most memorable film.

Though she can dazzle in both powers of the camera, the still photograph and the film, her special use here of film as retrospect is even more telling. The camera always preserves time, but film preserves the phenomenon of being itself, and an account of this preservation is almost inescapably moving. (Think of Fellini's *Intervista*, which I sometimes do.) It is quite possible that Varda will be as happily remembered for this fantasia about her career as for what she did in it.

Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism

Edited by James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus
(Princeton University Press, 341 pp.)

1 March 1999

“We want better films!!!” is the line that appeared—twice—on the cover of *Close Up* for November 1927. The magazine had begun publication four months earlier, the first serious journal about film in English. The editorial office was in Switzerland, the printer was French (the same one who had done *Ulysses*), two of the three editors were British, the third American. Kenneth Macpherson, a Scot, was an artist, a novelist, and, eventually, a filmmaker. His wife and co-editor was a historical novelist known by the pen name Bryher. Her real name was Annie Winifred Ellerman; she was the daughter of a tycoon who was said to be the richest man in England after the king and who apparently subsidized the magazine. The third editor, who was also Bryher’s lover, was the Imagist poet H.D.—Hilda Doolittle. *Close Up* appeared monthly for forty-two issues, until January 1931; then it became a quarterly because, the editors claimed, the arrival of sound had confined their readership to English-speaking countries. (They didn’t explain how silent films had enabled people in other countries to read their English pages.) The quarterly quit in December 1933. No reason was given.

During its brief life *Close Up* attracted exceptional contributors and much admiration, not least from eminent film artists such as Eisenstein and Pabst. Now an anthology appears called *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism*, generously illustrated. This book is overdue. The magazine’s value has long been recognized. (I included two of its articles in an anthology of film criticism that I edited in 1972.) Now much of what distinguished the magazine can be held in your hand.

Like the original editors, the anthology’s three editors are an international group. All three are teachers of film studies, James Donald in Australia, Anne Friedberg in America, Laura Marcus in England. Commendable work by all of them. Instead of merely selecting articles and running them chronologically, they have grouped the pieces into eight sections by topic—“Enthusiasms and Execrations,” “From Silence to Sound,” “Cinema and Psychoanalysis,” and so on—and each section has an enlightening introduction by one of the editors. (Apropos of the psychoanalysis section: after *Close Up* finished, Bryher studied to become an analyst and H.D. was analyzed by Freud.) These introductions are given full endnotes, to which have been added biographical notes on all the contributors, a detailed table of contents for the magazine’s entire run, and a time chart locating *Close Up* in the cultural flow of its time.

This leads to the book's subtitle. Film, whether viewed seriously or as popular entertainment, figured prominently in the lives and astonishments and writings of many modernist artists. (Joyce was actually in the film business for a while.) The book's editors state that they have placed special emphasis on the writings of H.D. and Dorothy Richardson (discussed below)

to pose the question whether literary modernism . . . should be seen in large part as a response to, and an appropriation of, the aesthetic possibilities opened up by cinema.

"In large part" might be questioned; in some part is unquestionable. An early sensitive response to Chaplin was Hart Crane's "Chaplinesque." Some of the first American film critics were poets: Vachel Lindsay, William Ellery Leonard, Carl Sandburg, Louise Bogan—and H.D. Not all modernist writers responded thus: Dorothy Richardson, suggesting contributors to Bryher, wrote: "You know Lawrence loathes films. Foams about them. I'm sure he'd foam for you." (He didn't.) But another anthology, of poems and excerpts from books written in the first third of this century, could easily be assembled to show the almost immediate effect of film on literature.

The topics covered in these *Close Up* articles range widely, both predictably and not. Among them are fulminations against cinematic trash, explorations of the avant-garde, anger at constricted film distribution, an ode to Garbo's beauty, rhapsodies about cinematic possibilities yet untapped. The transition to sound is of course discussed at length, pro and con. The famous visionary statement about sound by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Aleksandrov, first published in Leningrad, was translated for *Close Up*. A strong statement, "The Sound Film: The Salvation of Cinema," came from the magazine's Paris correspondent, Jean Lenauer. (Lenauer was last seen as the waiter in *My Dinner with André*, in 1981.) One surprise is the unusual attention paid to black filmmakers and actors, especially in "The Aframerican Cinema" by Harry Alan Potamkin. (The magazine started a corollary enterprise that published books and produced some films; in one of the latter Paul Robeson appeared.)

Outstanding is the section of articles by Dorothy Richardson. Now nearly forgotten, this English author was once noted for *Pilgrimage*, a series of thirteen novels that pioneered in the use of interior monologue. Richardson's film writings, as presented here, form a small phenomenology of film. She writes on the musical accompaniment of silent films; on intertitles, which she calls captions ("The test of the caption is its relative invisibility. In the right place it is not seen as a caption"); a paean to the neighborhood movie theater ("the small local cinema that will remain reasonably in tune with the common feelings of common humanity"). This last connects with her warm response to "The Thoroughly Popular Film," in which she saw a resonant optimism:

the wedding bells, the reconciled family, the reclaiming of the waster, all these things are [those films'] artistic conventions, and the tribute of love paid to them by the many is a tribute to their unconscious certainty that life is ultimately good.

Richardson's little poems on the dailiness of moviegoing are a charming contrast to the aesthetic ambitions of much of *Close Up*; and her optimism provides something more than an ironic contrast to the last piece in the anthology—a report by Bryher, just returned from Berlin in June 1933, on the advent of Hitler.

The subtext of this anthology, or of any comparable anthology, is the ingrained conflict between a small portion of the film world and the major portion on which the film world depends for income. This is a conflict that will never be resolved. In an insidious way, the struggle is part of film's vitality. (The occasional victories in this struggle are what some of us breathe for.) Subsidy helps—in virtually every filmmaking country except the United States—but it can't cure the basic disparity between the tastes of a minority and the technological expense that relies on response by the majority.

This anthology includes a letter from Pabst in which he proposes a scheme to reach and satisfy the 10 percent of the film audience that he thinks would support superior films. "Somehow," he says, *Close Up* must reach that minority. "Somehow" is not made quite clear. Yet the demand for consistently "better films" persists, even if not quite as imperious as it was seventy years ago. Meanwhile—a rather long meanwhile, I'd guess—thanks for a book full of wistful yet heartening antecedents.

Projections 9: French Filmmakers on Filmmaking

Edited by Michel Ciment and Noël Herpe (Faber and Faber, 193 pp.)

17 May 1999

Projections 9: French Filmmakers on Filmmaking, published by Faber and Faber, arrives. This journal, almost always written by filmmakers, has almost always been edited by John Boorman and Walter Donahue, but they have turned over No. 9 to Michel Ciment and Noël Herpe, who are on the editorial board of *Positif*, the long-established French film magazine. The French editors were invited to select interviews with French directors that *Positif* has published in the last twenty years to give Anglophone readers a fuller view of film activity in their country. (Not all of these directors have been well represented abroad.) Ciment and Herpe have, helpfully, chosen interviews related to a lately completed film by each of the twenty-one directors. Translations were done by Pierre Hodgson.

The directors range in age from Eric Rohmer (who had just finished *Conte d'Été*) and Claude Chabrol (*La Cérémonie*) to such younger people as Jacques Audiard (*Un Héros très discret*) and Mathieu Kassovitz (*La Haine*). Consequently, differences in outlook and intent are inevitable. A few constants run throughout—some contradictions within interviews, some of what can only be called gab. But also scattered throughout are some nuggets. Bertrand Tavernier:

My last three films [he is speaking in 1984] have a great deal in common . . . in the way the camera moves. . . . I see camerawork as melodic rather than strategic.

The remark helps to explain why Tavernier's films seem to flow, rather than to struggle for startling shots. Alain Cavalier, director of the unearthly *Thérèse*, when asked if he had rehearsed a lot:

Just the opposite. We didn't even have readings. A film is a secret between the actor and the process. You just have to check how the actor takes possession of the film, and what he has to offer it. It's all about focus. Total concentration.

This, a far remove from the theater, sounds much like Robert Bresson's views on film acting.

Bresson is present. This procession of directors is headed—how otherwise?—by an interview with him, the oldest of the group, born 1901, who in 1983 had just finished his final film, *L'Argent*. Bresson's remarks proceed from the same stratosphere as does his invaluable little book *Notes on Cinematography*. He is hardly ignorant of the facts of the film world, including finances, but those facts seem to have had much the same relation to his work as his bodily functions. Without them, he couldn't live, but he doesn't quite see them as his reason for living.

His aesthetics are clear. The interviewer (Ciment) says that people always refer to asceticism in Bresson's work, "but what strikes me is the vigor." Bresson replies:

Vigor comes from precision. Precision is vigorous. When I am working poorly, I am imprecise. Precision is another form of poetry.

On the subject of sound:

I was slow to realize that sound defines space on film. A voice treated like a sound effect seems to give the screen an extra dimension. People who experimented with 3-D cinema were barking up the wrong tree. The third dimension is sound.

Strength to *Projections*. It's the most rewarding film journal that I know.

"The Death of Film"

6 September 1999

We live an age of endings. We have heard about the end of ideology, the end of history, the end of the novel, etc., for each of which impressive arguments were advanced. Now arrives the end of film—not of cinephilia, a matter previously discussed,

but of the film medium itself as we know it. The arguments in this case are not abstract or ideational: they are matters of technology, many of which are already proved.

This subject has been reported sketchily here and there, but at last it is fully addressed—by Godfrey Cheshire, the film critic of the *New York Press*, in a two-part article (issues of July 26–August 3 and August 4–10). “The Death of Film/The Decay of Cinema,” in its several thousand words, is more important than most recent books I have seen on the current state of film, and it certainly calls for more discussion than do those books.

Cheshire, informed in film history and coolly impassioned, begins with a definition of terms: “film refers to the traditional technology of motion pictures,” “movies here refers to motion pictures as entertainment,” “cinema refers to movies understood (and practiced) as an art.” The weight of his essay is on the first of these, but inevitably the other two are also involved.

“Film, like the telegraph and the Gatling gun, is nineteenth-century machinery,” says Cheshire, underscoring the fact that, despite improvements and the development of sound and color, the technology of film has fundamentally remained the same for a century: photography and the projection of photographs. This is changing. In the future, he maintains with plentiful examples, film will not be anything like what we now call film: it will consist of electronic images digitally managed and beamed via satellite to theaters.

The original picture is converted to digital information, which reconverts as three colors that are beamed through the projector’s lenses and recombined on the screen. In late June, 1999—a date to set beside May, 1895 [when films were first shown to a paying public in the United States] among little-herald-ed sea changes in the technologies of popular culture—the new system went on display in Los Angeles, New Jersey and New York.

Cheshire has seen *An Ideal Husband* thus conveyed and projected, and as a “videophobe,” he has to confess that it looked “great.”

The advantages of this system are clear: it eliminates the cost of making and shipping individual prints—sometimes thousands of prints of one film—and it also eliminates the damage that happens to prints, breaking and snipping and scratching and general wear and tear. (Also, I’d note, it lessens the chances for sloppy projection, the slowness in changing reels, the muzzy focus, the wacky sound.) The hundredth projection via beaming would not be in any way worse than the first.

But there are prices to be paid. Films will soon be made with “computer-generated imagery” (CGI) to facilitate beamed distribution, and CGI makes it very easy to alter films. If a film doesn’t do well at the box office in a Friday opening, says Cheshire, “there can be a new version ready for Saturday’s matinees. And if that doesn’t work, another version for Sunday.” What this possibility does to the idea of a filmmaker’s vision is chilling. The venerable concept of textual integrity, derived from literature, which even now has a will-o’-the-wisp aspect in the film world, begins to verge on the absurd.

Cheshire thinks that this new system of distribution predicates a lowered level of film production, that theaters will be filled with the equivalents of the most banal TV programs—game shows, scruffy talk shows, etc., done more lavishly. I can't see that this automatically follows. First, let's note that the general level of films now is not dizzyingly high; second, why would the audience for low-grade TV go to a theater and buy tickets as long as comparable stuff, even if not as huge or as garish, is available at home, free or for cable charges? The networks would have to conspire with the motion-picture studios to keep popular shows off the air so that the public was forced into (high-priced) theaters in order to see them. In our present era of merger-madness, this is not flatly inconceivable, but it might well bring about government action. Anyway, things will be bad enough if the general level of film programming merely stays the same as it is now.

In any case, for me the greater, more spirit-shaking threat is the matter of CGI, which already is commonly used to touch up traditional filmmaking. It's common knowledge that, for just a few instances, the heads of the two leading actors in *Titanic* were imposed digitally on the bodies of doubles in some of the rough action scenes, and that figures were inserted digitally (by the producers) in *Eyes Wide Shut* to mask copulations in the orgy sequence and thus ensure an R rating. When CGI becomes the rule, what will happen to actors, to acting? Actors may be essential as models, but what people of personality and talent will make a practice of supplying their persons and performances as raw material for digital deconstruction and reassembly? If talents are not attracted, who will do the "preliminary" performances for the first draft of the film? Will live actors become superfluous? If so, will audiences develop affection and response for fabricated actors? If they do, whether those performers are remodeled real people or concoctions from scratch, will Technician A be hailed as the creator of a better Julia Roberts and Technician B for a super De Niro? In short, what will become of, in Cheshire's sense, cinema?

That all this can happen is now a matter of fact; that it will happen is a matter of probability. So much money can be saved, as against the present system, and made, as per the new one, that the odds against change are small. Some filmmakers would very likely continue in the present way, particularly the so-called independents, firstly, because the changeover will be expensive and independent filmmakers won't be able to afford it, and, secondly, because most of them are artists, not scions of George Lucas who think of film basically as a technological lab. Nonetheless, prepare. Cheshire says:

If you have a child who is a toddler, the chances are excellent that you will one day have to explain what film was, and how different theaters were before digital projection brought live TV . . . and a dazzling array of other novelties into them.

All of Cheshire's points cited above, and others, are vigorously explored in his essay. We can soothe ourselves with the fact that prophecies, even when as well-grounded as these, rarely eventuate precisely. But it seems quite likely that film as we have known it has had its primacy. It will continue, just as the composition and the performance of

opera continue though opera is no longer the immense public attraction that it was in past centuries. Film as we know it will possibly need as much cossetting as opera now needs.

What will happen, I have to wonder, to the new directing talents that could blossom only in our kind of film? Conjecture that Griffith or Eisenstein had been born fifty years earlier, before film's invention, and what would history know of a mediocre stock-company actor-playwright or a moderately gifted theater designer-director? As for film acting, I can only shiver for its future.

An irony overarches this whole matter. Film was the first art born out of technology, the first humanist cultural enterprise to arise from the onrush of science in the nineteenth century. Now, a hundred years later, a new technology threatens to swallow that humanist technological enterprise. The souls of those old-time theater folk who lamented the arrival of film—as a threat to their profession—may be smiling grimly at what they see as poetic justice.

Postscript. Apropos of Godfrey Cheshire's two-part article (in the *New York Press*), "The Death of Film/The Decay of Cinema," an important discussion of new distribution methods and of digital filmmaking. In January, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held a symposium to discuss Cheshire's article, featuring Cheshire and five others from various film fields. The discussion was enlightening, and I was gratified to see that at least some of the speakers were worried about the effect that the new dispensation, however technologically fine, may have on the content of films.

Another concern occurred to me later. Until now, a number of people have been agitating for film preservation. The films that we already have we actually don't have—to a shocking degree. They disintegrate and otherwise disappear in incredible numbers. As the new millennium brings us the new technology, will this concern about these past films diminish? Will TV-cable distribution and the digital process alter not only the future but also the past?

Further note: I said above that the subjects Cheshire treated in his *New York Press* article—digital filmmaking and the TV transmission of films to theaters—had previously been reported only sketchily. I meant, of course, in the general press, not technical journals, but even so I omitted mention of Walter Murch's piece in the May 2nd issue of *The New York Times*. Anything that Murch (a preeminent film editor) says in this field is worth attention, and I should have cited his article.

American Film Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era

Edited by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby

(Indiana University Press, 186 pp.)

4 October 1999

For decades, theater historians have been investigating audiences of the past, trying to determine which people went to the theater in a particular place at a particular time, what they expected, how they reacted. This kind of research has lately taken hold in film history. One of the results was an international conference on the subject in London in 1998, which was so fruitful that the British Film Institute is to publish four volumes of the papers.

The first of these, issued here by the Institute's American affiliate, Indiana University Press, is *American Film Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*, edited by Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby. Most of the ten papers are fascinating.

Judith Thissen leads off with "Jewish Immigrant Audiences in New York City, 1905–1914," describing how, in that short span, those audiences went through several stages. "Between 1880 and 1914 two million East European Jews immigrated to the United States . . . The majority of them disembarked in New York." They congregated in the lower East Side, and saloons soon opened for them. By 1902 the saloons began offering Yiddish vaudeville shows; then music halls were opened just for vaudeville. Then they altered:

By the end of 1907, nearly all Yiddish music halls on the East Side had been turned into moving picture theaters.

But the films were from the world "outside" and didn't satisfy the communal needs of the audience, so Jewish vaudeville performers often appeared in the movie theaters while reels of the short pictures were being changed. Within two years, many of those music halls had abandoned films completely and returned to local talent. "The revival of Yiddish vaudeville," says Thissen, "can therefore . . . be explained as a grass-roots resistance to the increasing influence of mainstream American culture." But this situation changed again in 1912–1913, when feature-like films arrived. For economic and other reasons, the music halls began to disappear and movie palaces began to arrive. All of these changes occurred within ten years.

Giorgio Bertellini's article, called "Italian Imageries, Historical Feature Films and the Fabrication of Italy's Spectators in Early 1900s New York," comes close to justifying its weighty title. His most striking point is that Italian immigrants, mostly from the south of their homeland, found national identity in another country through films they apparently could not have seen in their native towns and villages.

As Antonio Gramsci described it, the Italian bourgeoisie—unlike the French—had been unable and unwilling to "unite the common people" through a political and cultural sense of nationhood. Southern masses were hardly affected in their material and

social lives by nationalistic traditions—at least, until they emigrated. It was only in New York that Italy's Southern population experienced an intense, albeit idealized image of their nation, as it was mediated by Italian movies.

In "Film and Ethnic Identity in Harlem, 1896–1915," Alison Griffiths and James Latham describe the rapid metamorphosis of that district and one of the factors involved.

In a relatively short time, Harlem changed from a place where African-Americans had little or no access to theatres to a place where they patronized, operated and eventually owned them . . . Pre-war cinema in Harlem both responded to and molded a neighborhood that would shift from a genteel white suburb into a thriving center for African-American business and cultural life.

(When my father began practicing dentistry in uptown New York in 1912, he became a member of what was then called the Harlem Dental Society. A few years later, the society changed its name.)

Other cities—Chicago and Milwaukee—and the country as a whole are discussed in other articles. One of the most interesting is "The Revolt of the Audience: Reconsidering Audiences and Reception During the Silent Era." Here Steven J. Ross explores further one of the subjects in Kevin Brownlow's book, *Behind the Mask of Innocence*—those now-forgotten political-social films that were made in the early days.

Between 1905 and April 1917, when America entered the First World War, producers turned out 274 labor-capital films. Of the 244 films whose politics I could determine, 112 (46 percent) were liberal, 82 (34 percent) were conservative, 22 (9 percent) were anti-authoritarian, 17 (7 percent) were populist and 11 (4 percent) were radical."

After the war, the overall number shrank, yet there were at least 82 labor-capital films made between 1921 and 1929, the limit of the book's scope. Especially in the earlier years, most of these films were made in response to the demand of working-class audiences that their problems be treated.

Thomas Doherty investigates the effect that the arrival of sound had on audiences in "This Is Where We Came In: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of Early Sound Cinema." It took some time for film audiences to mitigate "the audible expression of approval and reproach" with which they had affected live performances and which they had continued irrelevantly during silent films but which was an annoyance during sound films. Doherty also outlines the growth of viewers' sophistication. For instance, the voice-over, commonplace to us, took some getting used to. And sound altered the custom of casual arrival. Nowadays audiences generally follow the announced schedule and arrive when the showing begins, but this is a latter-day custom. (I can remember arriving—often—in the middle of a picture and trying to figure out the beginning as I watched the end, then watching the beginning to see how well I had figured it.)

Says Doherty:

The audible screen rewrote the terms of motion picture spectatorship and recast the experience of movie-going.

This volume whets the appetite for the three volumes to come. And this first book underscores a paradox: how close and how remote are the oldest events in film history.

"The State of the Cinema: Humming Again"

22 May 2000

Through the last years of the last century, I began to hear a hum. It sounded familiar, but it took some time for me to place it. Then I remembered. In 1970 I had edited an anthology of American film criticism—from its beginnings to *Citizen Kane*—and I had spent days in libraries leafing through the yellowed, friable pages of the first American film magazines, such as the *Moving Picture World* and *Moving Picture News* (I hope that those magazines are now electronically stored). As I turned those yellowed pages, they seemed to give off heat, and with that heat a hum. Aside from the brief reviews, the stories were mostly about business deals, nickelodeons opened, distributors organized, studios founded (they were sometimes called "factories"), pictures planned; still, it seemed that everyone involved, from inventors to investors, was on fire. Few of them may have stopped to consider it, but all of them sensed—or seemed to sense—that they were involved in one of the most radical and important advances in the history of human consciousness. No one knew where the motion picture would lead, but all of them were convinced that it would lead somewhere exciting. And all of them were in at the beginning! "Bliss was in that dawn to be alive. . . ."

When the feature film arrived, around 1910, replacing the shorts with which the industry had started, the furor exploded further. Said Benjamin B. Hampton in his *History of the American Film Industry*:

Superlatives are needed to describe the success of the screen when films reached the storytelling length of a thousand feet. . . . In every city and large town in the country so many customers appeared at ticket windows that there were not enough halls or upstairs rooms to seat them, and a new type of playhouse had to be created to accommodate them.

Said David Robinson in *From Peep Show to Palace*:

Available statistics . . . suggest that the number of nickelodeons in the United States doubled between 1907 and 1908 to around 8,000, and by 1914, when the 5-cent theater was already being supplanted by grander houses, was around 14,000. By 1910 it was estimated that 26 million Americans visited these theaters every week.

I can still remember the hum of excitement from those old magazine pages.

It didn't take long to see why I was hearing it again. The rush was on again—to cyberspace. Avalanches of people were pouring into the new computer world: inventors, manufacturers, users. Every week, every day—every hour, it seemed—someone was finding a new use, a new device, a new extension of this marvelous electronic power. The excitement that leaped off the news pages was much like the heat of the Edison-Griffith days: the sense that mankind was making a leap forward in consciousness at such speed and of such importance that no one could yet calculate its size or reach.

People in the arts have responded to this phenomenon with fear or reluctance or compliance—and, eventually, with carefully fashioned hope. A greatly experienced book publisher, Jason Epstein, wrote recently in the *New York Review of Books* of the deprecations that the World Wide Web has worked on traditional publishing and bookselling, yet he bases his hopes for the future of publishing on that same Web. He sees a paradoxical blessing in the Web: it can help publishing to return to its lost simplicities. The Web can free it of its latter-day corporate burdens. All the industrial aspects can be assigned to specialist firms. Book publishing may therefore become once more a cottage industry of diverse, creative, autonomous units, or so there is now reason to believe.

In the film world, it's different. As Godfrey Cheshire and others have lately been telling us, computer-related technologies like digital filmmaking and the cable distribution of films to theaters have their benefits but also their grave risks, from the technical to the creative. (The latest news on this front is that much of the Roman grandeur in *Gladiator* was digitally manufactured. Today all electrodes lead to Rome.) So far, it is hard to see, as Epstein does for publishing, any intrinsic blessings in the computer age for the art of film.

Still, one can always rely, residually, on the Law of Exceptions—one of the premier elements in human activity. When we look at the burst of film energy a hundred years ago, we see the rush for a new Klondike: gold in them hills! Concern about the possibilities for art back then were much tinier than the chance for profit. But, in proof, is money-making all that came out of a hundred years of film? Was it all mere merchandise and merchandising? The exceptions arrived and keep arriving.

Ignore for a moment the peaks of Ford and Bergman and Fellini and Bresson and Ozu and Antonioni. Look at the present. Look at some of the films that have been made in this country in the last twelve months, made in a culture that is increasingly homogenized and mass-produced. I do not admire these films equally, a few of them not at all, but just consider their individuality.

From the Hollywood factories have come in the last year:

The Straight Story. An infirm elderly man rides a lawn mower across Iowa to visit his ailing brother.

Time Code. The screen is split into four parts throughout, telling stories, in actual elapsed time, that ultimately flow together.

The Virgin Suicides. Five teenaged sisters in a small town kill themselves, with no explanation offered.

The Big Kahuna. Three salesmen in a hotel suite, which the picture almost never leaves, explore their souls.

Being John Malkovich. An almost Kafkaesque prank about office lives and private dreams.

Jakob the Liar. A big star plays a Jewish concentration-camp prisoner who is killed.

Breakfast of Champions. A highly stylized, quasi-symbolic comedy about a world of salesmen and sex.

EdTV. The appalling standards of the TV audience are held up to excoriation.

Joe Gould's Secret. A picture made solely for its portrait of a Greenwich Village eccentric many decades ago.

Is this a list of much-munched commercial clichés?

Obviously the flood of formulaic entertainments, good and less good, roared all around these exceptions, but the fact that these films came into being in that quaint, old-fashioned twentieth-century production system makes it seem possible that there will also be exceptions in the new technological order. "Or so," as Epstein says about publishing, "there is now reason to believe." The cyberspace hum of excitement, like its forebear when film was being born, may not be a golden doom, may bring its own exceptions.

Just so I don't sound too sanguine, let me add a sadder note. There is a declining interest in film style. One characteristic of the best directors through the last century was their concern with the way they told their stories as much as with the stories themselves. It seemed to them, or so it seemed to us, that there was no point in telling a story, no matter how important or urgent it was, unless it was presented in a manner that conveyed the maker's vision, that was integral to the material. We cannot look at much of a Sternberg or Truffaut or Godard or Lang or Hitchcock or Kurosawa film without recognizing the author. This recognizability was not the central point, yet the maker of the film wanted his making of it to be so apt, so personal, that it was hard to imagine the story otherwise.

Nowadays this ambition has diminished. The newer directors today, including most of those who made the pictures listed above, are concerned to present their work clearly, not much more. (The exception is David Lynch, director of *The Straight Story*.) Reasons for this decline in stylistic concern are easy to speculate about—society, in the last thirty years or so, has dampened individualism; film economics have made it a sufficient victory to get a daring film green-lighted, without making waves in method, and so on. We cannot be sure of these or any other reasons as yet. But this question lies deeper than technological change, deeper than electronics, so it is more worrisome.

Stanley Kubrick (1928–1999)

16 August 1999

In the spring of 1967, Robert Brustein, then dean of the Yale School of Drama, asked me to do a film course in the following academic year. I was to co-teach: I would meet the class one afternoon a week to deal with history and style, and on another day they would meet a filmmaker who would explore techniques. Brustein and I, both keen on the relatively recent *Dr. Strangelove*, decided to aim high and invite Stanley Kubrick for the filmmaking post. I agreed to approach Kubrick because I knew him slightly.

I had lunched with Kubrick in New York two years earlier. (One remark lingers. I praised Peter Sellers' three roles in *Dr. Strangelove*, and Kubrick said dryly, "Yes, three performances for the price of six.") We had lunched because I was inviting Kubrick to appear on a series about film that I was then doing on PBS in New York; he had seen some of the programs and was sufficiently interested to meet and talk about it, though eventually he declined. A year later, when I went to *The New York Times* as their theater critic—a brief sojourn, as it turned out—I had a warm note of congratulations from Kubrick.

So I now telephoned him, in England where he lived, to offer him the Yale job. He was pleased by the offer itself and, though highly dubious, said he wanted to consider it for a few days. And a few days later he wrote that he was sorry but he had to confirm his doubts. Two reasons were patent: he was now living abroad and he was working on a film. "This obviously makes it impossible." (Despite which, he had wanted to think it over.) "In addition to this," he said, "I have steadfastly avoided talks, lectures, etc., because they tend to formalize my own thinking, which I think would not be a good thing."

This was the last time I heard from him. I was in England fairly often thereafter, but I did not, as he had asked, ring him, because my reviews of his films, from *2001: A Space Odyssey* on, were adverse, increasingly so. Neither of us would have enjoyed a meeting. But I never forgot his statement above because, as it seemed to me, it was almost a prophecy. In one way his thinking became increasingly formalized, came closer and closer to sheer formalism. "The formalist," says Rudolf Arnheim,

emancipates the medium from the content it is supposed to serve. . . . Rather than submerging in the content, form steps between the beholder and the theme of the work.

This, it seemed to me, fit Kubrick more and more closely. Isolated—notoriously so—in his country home and in his studio, he became more concerned with filmmaking than with films. Yes, themes can be discerned in his work, and since his death the winking out of Kubrick themes has bloomed into a small critical industry. Certainly violence and cynical bleakness are patent in his work, but they seem structural conveniences to him rather than burning concerns. From 2001 on, with longer and longer periods of time between pictures, he became centered on the solution of problems, technical and narrative, rather than on creating work aimed at the responses of the viewer. Solipsism became king in the Kubrick studio; formalism became supreme. This is a long way from design, which is a beauty and blessing in art, a means of affecting people. Formalism is a tyranny even when self-imposed, as it usually is.

And now we have Kubrick's final film, finished just before his sudden death (at seventy). It is much too aptly the finale of a declining career. *Eyes Wide Shut* is a catastrophe—in both the popular sense and the classical sense of the end of a tragedy. Everything in Kubrick that had been worming through his career, through his ego, and through his extraordinary talent swells and devours this last film. It is a long slow exercise in self-admiration, in the formal fulfillment of film problems that he had set himself at the expense of the audience's involvement.

Begin with the title. It is completely meaningless before and after seeing the picture. Frederic Raphael, co-author with Kubrick of the screenplay, has written a lively short book about that experience, called *Eyes Wide Open* (!). In it, Raphael tells that they both scrounged for a title and that finally Kubrick proposed *Eyes Wide Shut*. "I refrained from any response," says Raphael, "except that of refraining from response. It was his movie." Later Raphael says,

Can he really consider *Eyes Wide Shut* a poetic title? If it incites him to make the movie, so be it.

Raphael's reactions to the title are a neat implicit definition of formalism.

The screenplay is derived from a short novel by Arthur Schnitzler called *Dream Novel*, which I haven't read. However, Raphael synopsisizes it in sufficient detail to confirm that the general outlines of the Schnitzler story and of the film are the same. Kubrick wanted the locale transposed from Schnitzler's Vienna around 1900 to New York today, an odd decision for a middle-European escapade. Everything that happens could possibly happen in New York—what couldn't happen in New York?—but the shape and the temper seem less at home here than in *alt Wien*.

A very successful doctor, Bill Harford, and his wife, Alice, are happily married and have a small child. Bill and Alice go to a large, lavish Christmas party, and each of them gets a chance for an affair. Alice rejects her offer; Bill is prevented from accepting his. But both offers raise thoughts of extramarital possibilities in them. Bill investigates those possibilities. (Alice's only venture is to confess a temptation the past summer which didn't actually end in bed but which Bill keeps imagining thereafter as a porno movie.) Bill gets a late-night call to the home of a patient who has suddenly died, and in the

dead man's bedroom, his daughter, Marion, throws herself at Bill. He gets away but is so aroused that, while walking home, he lets a hooker take him to her apartment. But nothing happens there, either, because he gets a cell-phone call from his wife.

Yet that same night—with the help of a pianist friend—he sneaks his way into a masked orgy held by very rich men in a Long Island mansion. Costumed and masked—I omit description of the costumier's establishment, which is blatantly an exotic set piece—he is nonetheless unmasked as an intruder before he can have sex. He just about escapes with his life, or at least that is what he is made to think.

The next day, further heated by a sexual nightmare that his wife recounts about her “lover” and by the porno film that he keeps imagining of his wife and that man, Bill tries to get in touch with Marion. Thwarted, he then tries to visit the hooker he met last night, but she is gone. She had been informed that morning that she is HIV positive, Bill is told by another hooker who tries to persuade him to accept her instead. But he leaves.

All the above has involved death threats to himself and others, Bill thinks, but these threats are shown to be mere concoctions of his fervid fantasy. At the end Bill and Alice are reunited, tearfully, as if each had been through some sexual trial by fire, though in fact neither has actually slept with anyone else and Alice hasn't even tried. They go shopping for a Christmas present for their small daughter, and in the department store, after some homiletic plot-concluding exchanges, Alice says to Bill, “There's something very important we must do as soon as possible.” He asks what it is, and she says, “Fuck.”

The point of this 157-minute picture seems clear. Every married person has within himself or herself a secret cosmos of sexual imaginings, longings, fantasies, and perhaps extramarital actions. The actual marital life of a husband and wife involves only a portion of the sexual cosmos of each. But Schnitzler wrote this story in 1926, and even then he set it back at the beginning of the century, presumably because he felt it was already a little out of date. Kubrick, who had been nursing this project for years, insisted not only on ignoring Schnitzler's recognition of the necessary pastness of the story, but on transposing it to New York. Thus Kubrick coolly disregarded all that his audience has encountered of enlightenment in these matters in this century, not least in the films of Ingmar Bergman.

Even the elementary matter of credibility is ignored. After that extensive nocturnal odyssey of his—summoned to a dead man's bedside, embraced by Marion, visiting a hooker, going to a nightclub where he is steered to an orgy on Long Island, renting a costume and mask at midnight, being taxied far out on Long Island, attending the orgy and escaping—he gets home in the morning and, as he falls into bed, merely murmurs to his wife, “It took longer than I thought.”

Kubrick's very filmmaking acuteness seems to have been blunted. The scene in the costume shop is a faintly stale reminder of numerous old horror movies (including the mannequin scene in his own early *Killer's Kiss*). The orgy scene is redolent of *Seven Footprints to Satan* (1929) and many a Satanic thriller, especially because of Kubrick's clichéd close-ups of grotesque masks. (The music for the orgy, by Jocelyn Pook, is done on a piano struck, seemingly, with a sledgehammer.) Wit had virtually disappeared from

later Kubrick pictures, but here he permits an actor to insert a modernized version of Franklin Pangborn's swishy hotel clerk, a fixture of 1930s comedies. At the end, after Bill has returned his costume but has presumably lost the mask (he has actually misplaced it at home), he returns to his apartment; and Kubrick slips in a shot of the orgy mask on the pillow next to the sleeping Alice before Bill goes into the bedroom, so that when he does go in there, sees the mask, and is shocked, we are not. Worse, fundamentally worse, is Kubrick's insensitivity to the constant abrasion between the whole fabulated escapade and the hyperrealism of the New York setting, characters, and dialogue.

As for that dialogue, it is freighted with repetitions. Examples:

"We're going to the rainbow's end." "To the rainbow's end?" "To the rainbow's end."

"I'm just trying to figure out where you're coming from." "Where I'm coming from?"

"I had you followed." "You had me followed?"

Nearly three hours of this echo-chamber talk almost makes us beg for mercy, especially when it's all *molto andante*.

Kubrick wanted a married couple for his two leads. He first thought of Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger, says Raphael, but he engaged Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. When Cruise and Kidman were amorously busy in the film, I thought of the former theater stars Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, married, who always included a pat on the behind or a touch of the bosom to give the audience a small thrill of private glimpse. That was pretty quaint compared to the Cruise-Kidman behavior, but it was the same principle.

Doubtless this couple would not decline roles just because they are married: it would be a denial of acting ability and adventure. And Kidman is moving, despite her limited voice, particularly in her two long speeches, the remembrances of a temptation and of her nightmare about it. Cruise, a proven powerful actor, seems here to be repressed and contained, deliberately slowed down by the director. His role is much larger than Kidman's and is less vivid. I'd hazard that Cruise was restrained by Kubrick in aid of some pattern the director had in mind, rather than the effect on the audience. More formalism! One other performance must be noted: the Swedish actress Marie Richardson plays Marion, and is excellent in her difficult transition from mourning to sexual outburst.

In the matter of sex, which is the matter of the film, Kubrick tinctures heavily with salaciousness, the particular salaciousness of aging film directors who have the power to display women as they like. Not because the film's first shot is of Kidman undressing—a stunning shot, in fact—nor because of Kubrick's insistence on showing her on the toilet chatting with her husband who is in the bathroom with her, nor of the rat-a-tat of the f-word in the dialogue (hardly a distinction these days), but because of Kubrick's insistence on showing as many naked female bodies as he can possibly crowd into his film.

(Something like the latter-day Godard.) For instance, at the lavish Christmas party early in the picture, Doctor Bill is summoned by his host to attend a young woman whom the host has been screwing upstairs but who took a hard drug and is blotto. Any reasonably human person, like the host, would have covered her prone naked body, but Kubrick insists on her nakedness. This, he might have argued, was brutal candor, but it looks like brutal voyeurism.

So this is where the Kubrick career ends, with this technically accomplished, inadequately conceived work. Retrospect is inevitable. A young photographer claws his way into film (he shot his earliest pictures himself, adroitly), makes a war fantasy and two crime thrillers. None of them, as he himself said, is really worth looking at again; but what is extraordinary, and is insufficiently noted, is the change in texture and style from his third feature, *The Killing*, just one more Hollywood film noir struggling for eccentricity, to *Paths of Glory*, a grim drama about heartlessness in the French army in World War I. Of course, Kubrick had more money for that fourth feature, but it was spent by a very different director from the man who had made the third. He had suddenly become a sophisticated and excitingly fluent filmmaker. *Spartacus* was insufficiently appreciated because it is a costume spectacle, but it was directed with muscular imagination. Then came some work on Brando's *One-Eyed Jacks*, which Kubrick quit because, he said at our lunch, Brando was absolutely insane. Then *Lolita*, beautiful, whose only fault is that it isn't really the novel. Then *Dr. Strangelove*, a pinnacle. But then the decline into cinematic display, from *2001* to the end: the preening pride in being figuratively alone and literally imperial. Perforce there had to be stories and actors, but, seemingly, they were only necessary nuisances for Kubrick.

At the last, he had become an advanced cinematic constructor, virtuosic but immured. In another guise, the formalism that he dreaded had prevailed.

Marcello Mastroianni (1924–1996)

30 August 1999

Not many films run three hours and twenty minutes. Not many such films seem too short. *Marcello Mastroianni: I Remember* is unique: when it ended, I thought, "Oh, no! Is that all?"

This biographical documentary of the actor, who died in 1996, was directed and edited by Anna Maria Tato, who has made several previous films and who was a close companion of his for many years. The structure is simple: a long interview with Mastroianni is intercut with clips from some of the films he mentions, with bits of a few earlier interviews, with some comments by other people, with some shots of relevant places. As the title says, Mastroianni remembers, that's all. And we are lucky enough to be able to watch and listen.

The main interview, which sustains the film, was done at various times in his last

year while he was in Portugal making his last picture, at seventy-two, with an eighty-eight-year-old director, Manoel de Oliveira. (That picture, *Voyage to the Beginning of the World*, other than that it's the actor's finale, is not of great interest.) The tone of this interview is quite different from most actor interviews because it was Mastroianni himself who urged Tato to make the film, which they had been discussing for some time. With an urgency probably linked to his physical condition, though this is not mentioned, he and Tato decided to shoot the interview during his free days in Portugal. They invited the cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno, who had worked with Mastroianni on *The Organizer* and *The Stranger*, among others, to shoot this interview—and not on video or 16mm, but with a standard 35mm camera. Thus the visual quality of the interview is up to the quality of the film clips that we see, including a few from Rotunno's own exceptional work.

There is no interviewer asking questions and no hint that questions have been deleted: Mastroianni simply talks. There is no pomp, though it would have been silly for him to pretend ignorance of his world fame. There is no sob, though he is reminiscing. (He had a birthday in Portugal, and we see a party given by the cast and crew of the Oliveira picture. I studied his face while they cut a large cake inscribed "Viva Marcello." He smiles.) Throughout, he is wry, appreciative, amused, with a self-mockery that is not the usual thinly disguised conceit of the eminent.

He tells us that he made 170 films, twenty of which were rotten. We see clips of a few of the latter. He says that the rest of his career had its ups and downs in quality, and that he's glad of it—it was more interesting than an unswerving straight line. (Just as well that he was glad of it. Who can imagine 150 fine films in any one person's career?) We see clips of oddities, like a film of his that was never released and a film about ancient Rome in which he plays the brother of his real brother, Ruggero, who spent most of his life as a film editor. Marcello pays tribute to some of the directors he worked with, especially—of course—De Sica and Fellini. We see samples of his tap dancing and his tango, the latter from a theater musical about Valentino called *Ciao, Rudy*, which he did in Rome. (I was glad that he took note of his theater beginnings: the first time I ever saw him was in a Roman production of *Death of a Salesman*, in which he played "Beef.") He talks about his background, declaring at one point that he is rooted in Rome and later that he is rooted in Naples—in fact, he was born in Fontana Liri, which is about halfway between the two cities. He tells a funny, affectionate story about his mother, who had become stone deaf, and his father, made blind by diabetes, when they went to the movies.

But beyond his affections and anecdotes, beyond the inside views of his career, there is something in this film that belongs to us as much as to him. To all of us who have been seduced by the Fontana di Trevi scene in *La Dolce Vita*, riven by the ragged professor in *The Organizer* or the tormented, proud homosexual in *A Special Day*, chilled by a glimpse into the void with Guido in *8½*—to name only a few of the almost blindingly beautiful clips—this documentary is an intimacy with a man who, like all valuable artists, helped to make our own privacies. To see this film is, besides the artist's reminiscence, to remember ourselves.

Robert Bresson (1901–1999)

17 January 2000

Adieu. Robert Bresson died in Paris on December 18th at the age of ninety-eight. He was one of the last survivors of those geniuses who made the first century of film comparable to the first century of Western drama. Excepting Shakespeare, the first hundred years of the drama, in Athens, were the greatest in its history; and the same may turn out to be true of film's first century. Bresson was one of the directors who exalted that century, an artist of a quality that makes such terms as "great" and "pure" seem worn.

He directed only thirteen films in his forty-year career, the last one in 1983. To cite a few titles is almost to tremble again in memory of them: *A Man Escaped*, *Diary of a Country Priest*, *Mouchette*, *L'Argent*. To glimpse the mind and spirit behind his work, look at his *Notes on Cinematography*. (An instance of his counsel to himself when shooting: "Put oneself into a state of intense ignorance and curiosity, and yet see things in advance.") Bresson rarely gave interviews, but there is an extraordinary, extensive interview with him in Charles Thomas Samuels's fine collection, *Encountering Directors*. In that interview we meet, like an old friend, the inspiring man we have already met in his films.

As with Yasujiro Ozu, Bresson saw the purpose of film at its most simple and most difficult: to make the invisible visible.

John Gielgud (1904–2000)

19 June 2000

The news of John Gielgud's death arrived just after I had begun reading Jacques Barzun's monumental new book, *From Dawn to Decadence*. The passing of this great actor—at ninety-six, three years older than the author of this 877-page book—seemed to underscore Barzun's title. If a five-century-long cultural climate is altering drastically, where are future Shakespearean actors of Gielgud's majesty, nurtured by that culture, to come from? The only remaining peer that I know of is Christopher Plummer, and he himself has said that the sort of training and experience that helped him to develop is no longer available.

Film has a place in this matter. First, fine examples of Gielgud's Shakespeare are available on film: among them, his Clarence in *Richard III*, his Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, his Prospero (a portion of it, anyway) in *Prospero's Books*. But, for Shakespeare performances more intrinsic to film, performances agreeably attuned to cultural change, there are Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, and *Hamlet*. (*Love's Labour's Lost* is en route.) I've never seen Branagh on stage, where he probably developed his Shakespearean style; but it certainly fits film wonderfully—a miraculous blend of vernacular approach with the music and lift of verse. I'm sad that I'm to see and hear no

new Gielgud, but the old order once again changeth. In a recent interview, Barzun was asked if decadence is irreversible. He said, "Irreversible on the same track, yes." Will the new track opened by Branagh lead upward? We'll see.

Valerio Zurlini (1926–1982)

25 September 2000

The Film Society of Lincoln Center recently presented a retrospective of the films of Valerio Zurlini. The response "Who?" is precisely why this program made me sad. Zurlini was one of the Italian directors who flourished after World War II. Of that group he is one of the least known in the United States. I had previously seen only one Zurlini film, *The Girl with the Suitcase*, with Claudia Cardinale, which was included in this recent series. Of the other seven features in the group, I was able to see four. And they made me sad. The subjects were somber enough, true, but my sadness came because this retrospective could do little more than return Zurlini to obscurity.

His talent need not be exaggerated in order to heighten the pity: he is not in the top rank of Italian directors. His range is astonishing, from the predictable neorealism and existential suspension of the era to the sheerly political and the daringly symbolic, but his screenplays are not as consistently fine as his filmmaking. He was a director of audacity and—particularly—of vision. The first two minutes of *Family Diary*, which was shot by the excellent Giuseppe Rotunno, establish Zurlini's impatience with assembly-line framing, his ability to see for himself yet without freakishness. His actors, notably Marcello Mastroianni in *Family Diary* and Alain Delon in *The Professor*, are totally subscribed to his films.

Three Zurlini films are available on video in America, and I hope they will be sought. But the odds must be that, after this retrospective, he will sink back into the shadows from which he and so many other talented others deserve to be rescued. Of course, there simply isn't room enough in the light for them all, but that fact doesn't make their obscurity less of a loss.

CONCLUSION: "THE CRITIC AS WRITER"

BY STANLEY KAUFFMANN

From *Salmagundi*, 137/138 (Winter-Spring 2003): 41–47.

The distinction rankles. Once again I've read on a book jacket that the author is "a writer and critic." This distinction between writer and critic is not only a jolt to the critical ego, it is an astigmatic obstacle to the reader's appreciation of the best criticism, and it softens the demands that the reader ought to be making on the critic.

Oscar Wilde, who in fact wrote little criticism, nonetheless provided an outstanding discussion of this subject. In his dialogue *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde employs his usual flourish so that his overstatement can be scaled back with room to spare. He maintains that the critic is at least the equal of the artist.

The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and color.

He implies that the critic's work is at a higher level of refinement than the artist's because "the critic deals with materials that others have, as it were, purified for him." As an instance, Wilde proposes that Ruskin's writing about art is at least as great as most of the art he writes about. Argue though one may with Wilde's fiats, which a critic probably must do in order to keep his balance, it is gratifying to see a literary artist propose aesthetic regard for critics.

Ruskin amen: but almost every veteran reader can name a critic of the past whose writing, as such, has meant much to him. Haunting my own mind is one of the most savory passages of English prose that I know. It is in a critical work, Samuel Johnson's life of Milton. Says Johnson of the poet:

He sometimes descends to the elegant, but his element is the great. He can occasionally invest himself with grace; but his natural port is gigantic loftiness. He can please when pleasure is required; but it is his peculiar power to astonish.

Wilde's comments, flamboyant though they are, plus such an Augustan passage from Johnson, help us at the least to make our demands on criticism more literary. We are accustomed to value it principally, if not solely, for the opinions expressed. Our reason for reading some critics instead of others is usually our respect for the perception and intellect to be found in some and not in others. Obviously these criteria are not in question, but, pursuing them, we tend to ignore the way in which opinions are put. Often

we quite knowingly dig through dense writing in order to mine the insights. But when the writing is good, the criticism does more than illuminate its subject more succinctly: it blesses us with beauty—no other term will do—that is an endorsement of the whole being of art.

For examples of criticism as literature, we don't need to reach to the classical shelves. Here are three passages of relatively recent work that, in my view, exemplify criticism as an art adding to an art. Irving Howe on two Hemingway books:

The Old Man and the Sea: a confection of synthetic wisdom, an exercise in pidgin-classicism, a parody of composure and lilt. *Across the River and Into the Trees*—the swagger of a failing conqueror, all garrulousness and fantasy, but as a personal revelation unbearably sad, the pose crumbling, the terror of getting old finally breaking past his guard.

Richard Gilman on Chekhov's *Three Sisters*:

Time passes or stretches out, time surrounds, and things are lost in it, continuously, without fail. Nothing is salvaged except as traces in the spirit and through the valor of the art. For the play's beauty lies in the recognition it gives, the enactment, of deprivation and diminishment as our condition, the essence of what we go through and, in struggle and doubtfulness, either come to terms with or evade.

Maynard Solomon on Beethoven:

In the *Ninth Symphony*, the condition of joy is elusive, even in Elysium. The search continues for a hidden God, a distant beloved, brotherhood. And Creation can begin again merely by the omission of a major or minor third.

To me, these passages are thrilling instances of fine writing. They are replete with critical insights, but they are equally to be valued, in my view, as writing.

That lovable vaudevillian George Burns once had a partner in his song-and-dance act who stammered when he spoke but who was smooth when he sang. Whenever this partner began to stammer in conversation, Burns would say, "Sing it, Harry, sing it," which Harry did, smoothly. One night, when they were on tour and were sharing a hotel room to save money, they got back to the hotel after the last show. George stopped in the bar for a drink, and Harry went up to their room. Two minutes later Harry came running into the bar, trying to tell George something but stammering badly. "Sing it, Harry," said George. Harry paused, took a deep breath, and warbled: "We've been robbed." Somewhere in this anecdote is a point worth remembering by the writers and readers of criticism.

No discussion of criticism can avoid a look at the academy, which is the source of most rewarding critical thought and of most lumpy critical writing. True, the critics quoted above were in the academy, but they are among the sadly few exceptions. In-

stances of clumsy, even ugly, academic writing are so numerous that to scoff at a few examples would be unjust.

I suggest a point in intellectual history where thickness came to be prized, when leaden prose came to be taken as proof of depth. It occurs in the career of Hegel. All critical writing before Hegel was certainly not lissome, but there is a place in Hegel's life where heaviness seems to have been canonized. When he was in his mid-thirties and was not yet in the academy, he was the editor of a daily newspaper. Walter Kaufmann says in his biography that Hegel

was forced to publish six times a week what ordinary people would understand. . . . Anyone who seriously compares Hegel before the age of forty with the Professor Hegel of the last fifteen years of his life is bound to ask: Whatever happened to him?

What happened was academic ambition and status. Certainly Hegel's intellectual power is past any praise here, but it seems glaringly possible that, because many were influenced by his mind, they were also influenced by his manner.

Academics in every humanistic field rank readability low among their criteria. Partly this is a case of untalented persons safeguarding their lack of talent: thus they hold that concern with style is not only secondary but a hint of trumpety concern. As a veteran of more than forty doctoral dissertation committees, I can attest to the persistence of this view, though it is always presented as dedication to gravity. In the academy, if scholarship and conventional form are adequate, any consideration of the writing as such is thought to verge on the cheap.

The worst of this condition is that it is unlikely to improve. In our increasingly populous age, there is a proportionate increase of teachers and consequently of academic critics, but it is difficult to see an equivalent growth in good academic writing—or any shift of concern about it in those humanists who judge writing.

It is only fair now to look at the other major locus of critical writing, journalism. This term includes (at least in the academy's view) everything from the daily newspaper to the quarterly, no matter how serious, for general readers. To me, this area is tender because I have spent more than four decades as a magazine critic, mostly with a weekly. Still, this experience has helped me to see a chief value and a chief defect in the field.

Journalistic criticism is of immense importance. Journalistic critics are usually the ones who winnow out the new works that will eventually reach the academic critics who have more time and space—and perhaps perception—for their writing. We will never know how many worthy plays or novels or films have been lost through opaque initial reception by journalists: we do know about the worthy works that journalists, simply through their attention, have marked for fuller treatment by later critics. This is a largely unrecognized contribution that the journalist makes to extensive critical appraisal.

The chief defect in journalistic criticism is a mirror image of the academy's chief defect. Flossy writing, sprightly or sulphurous or both, is journalism's counterpart of professorial sludge. Readability is held to be the prime asset, sometimes the only one.

The journalistic equivalent of Hegel, so to speak, is Max Beerbohm. He is the earliest influential example, in my view, of a critic whose main value is his style. Phrase-making critics, with little to offer but their phrases, existed before Beerbohm but none as thaumaturgic as he. Gentlemanly aplomb, or its prose equivalent, is as constant in Beerbohm as intellect is in Hegel. When Beerbohm became a theater critic in 1898, a job he kept until 1910, he was, by his own declaration, unqualified. He was “not fond of the theater. Dramatic art interests and moves me less than any of the other arts.” Nevertheless he wrote about the theater because he liked to write, and he did it so engagingly that readers cherished him despite his dilettantism. A couple of Beerbohm bits:

While Signora Duse walked through her part, the prompter threw himself into it with a will.

And:

I have no wish to see a perfect production of *Romeo and Juliet*; for I make it a rule to have no wishes that may not one day be fulfilled.

Who can resist his air of chatting with a peer? He was much less a critic than a welcome teatime companion, the only writer in history who seems always to have a flower in his buttonhole.

Beerbohm's immediate predecessor in his post was Bernard Shaw, who managed to combine superb style with the best criticism of theater performance in the language. Shaw's successor did not equal him in both respects, but Beerbohm's prose, if not his mind, was as appealing as Shaw's. Readers—therefore editors—were quite willing to settle for genteel amusement without the intellect.

The Beerbohm effect on journalistic criticism, in the theater initially and eventually in almost every art, was to put a premium on entertainment, very often at the expense of expertise. To object to this disparity is to risk indictment as an advocate of tedium; still, that disparity seems too clear and too distressing to be skirted. Cotton candy has become the staple diet in our journalistic criticism.

For any writer, criticism is always a second choice. No writer ever has initially aspired to be a critic rather than a poet or novelist or dramatist. But many writers have chosen to be good critics, if possible, rather than, in their own opinion, secondary artists. (One of the best-known instances is Cyril Connolly, who, after publishing one novel, decided to invest his talent in criticism, where it was more likely to prosper.) Certainly there is a long list of valuable critics who were also valuable artists in the arts they discussed. Eliot and Lawrence in literature, Reynolds and Delacroix in painting, Berlioz and Debussy in music, Eisenstein and Truffaut in film, are only a few of them. But is their critical writing always better than that of people who wrote little other than criticism?

The venerable gibe that critics are failed artists is true, but incomplete. The good critic is not a failure in the art of critical writing. Doubtlessly Howe and Gilman and Solomon would rather have been making the kinds of art they were discussing, but that

is a feeble reason to overlook the quality of what they did achieve, to miss the subscription and force and insight—all essential qualities in poetry or fiction or drama—that these critics enlisted in the creation of another art. The critic invests his experience of life and his imagination, at their most open and also at their most private, in his response to the artist's rendition of life and imagination. With this response, the critic creates a second literature.

Despite Wilde's flourish on the subject, all the above is not an argument to view even the best criticism as equivalent to the best art. It is an attempt to underscore the aesthetic value of some aesthetic judgments. It is to maintain—again—that one can read some critics as one reads any good book. Publishing people can forget the “writer and critic” distinction. “Writer” will do.

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